

The Pastoral and Moral Crises That Lie Ahead

December 30, 2016

What we are witnessing today, following the publication of "Amoris Laetitia", is a radical adoption of the absolutizing principle of subjective judgments of conscience and private interpretation of all moral norms.

[Fr. Mark A. Pilon](#)

There has been a moral and pastoral crisis for the last half century in the Church, but I honestly think we haven't yet seen anything like what might lie ahead. The 4 Cardinals—I like to call them "The Four Just Men" (coined by the prolific Edgar Wallace a century ago)—have [nailed the roots of this threat](#) in their five questions related to the apparent undermining of Church doctrine on intrinsically evil acts and the objective formation of conscience in Chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia* (AL). In fact, we are already seeing the very divisive effects of this document's confusion.

For instance, we are witnessing the very different implementations of AL in different local Churches. Some continue to follow the traditional pastoral practice of the Church which denies Holy Communion to couples living as husband and wife in invalid second unions following divorce. Others call for a case by case resolution where the Catholics involved are encouraged to decide whether this second [adulterous] union is God's will for them and whether they are allowed to receive Communion. Thus [one American bishop](#) has now encouraged divorced and remarried Catholics to "utilize the internal forum of

conscience” in making their decision as to whether they should receive Communion or refrain. In other words, private conscience now trumps the canon law of the Church and the moral law of God.

Another division arises when an American bishop, now a Cardinal, [openly criticizes](#) an American Archbishop’s directives regarding Communion for the divorced and remarried as being out of step with the Church. Then there was the unseemly attack of the Dean of the Roman Rota, [bitterly criticizing](#) the 4 Cardinals for their supposed betrayal of their office, which evidently requires that they never asks clarification from a pope, never mind question the actions of a pope.

Following that divisive incident, an Australian Archbishop demeaned the 4 Cardinals [by asserting that](#) they are seeking a “false clarity that comes because you don’t address reality.” He went on to say that during the Synod he himself “heard voices that sounded very clear and certain but only because they never grappled with the real question or never dealt with the real facts.”

So much for the intelligence, integrity and pastoral experience of 4 distinguished Cardinals and their supporters!

In another part of the world, an [Archbishop in Ireland](#) joined the chorus of criticism with this bit of ecclesial wisdom:

No marriage is lived just in clear and abstract black and white realities. The Church has to understand the grey areas of success and failures, of joys and of disappointments. Repeating doctrinal formulations alone is not the way to accompany people on a difficult journey. ...

Some, even senior Church figures; seem to feel that the affirmation of certainties in an abstract and undoubting way is the only way. While the Archbishop never directly names the Cardinals, the criticism is quite obviously aimed at them. They are presented as simplistic *rule followers*, who see things only as black or white, being mindless repeaters of abstract doctrinal formulations *ad nauseam* ([his words in another talk](#)) with little pastoral experience and even less compassion. That is where the liberal Church bloc is today: no accompanying here, no compassion here—just rank criticism. The 4 Cardinals have never resorted to any such *ad hominem* criticisms of the Pope or anyone who disagreed with them. This is more like American political nastiness than an effort at sincere dialogue.

Just the beginning?

And all of this rancor and division is, quite likely, just the beginning. The “utilization of the internal forum of conscience” as presented today by growing numbers of bishops and theologians is going to unsettle the objective moral teaching of the Church and undermine any pastoral practice based upon such objective teaching. It cannot and will not stop with Communion for the divorced and remarried. If private conscience overrides the objective moral teaching and determines the pastoral practice of the sacraments, then everything is up for change.

Think about it: how can the resolution of the problems related to pastoral practices by private conscience possibly stop with issue of Communion for the divorced living in invalid second unions? Surely the very same principle must apply ultimately to homosexual unions, to couples living in concubinage, indeed to anyone sexually active outside a valid marriage union. The internal forum of conscience

solution cannot be logically limited to this single “Communion” issue, and it will not be so limited.

What we are witnessing today, then, following the publication of *Amoris Laetitia*, is a radical adoption of the absolutizing principle of subjective judgments of conscience and private interpretation of all moral norms. Already one Belgian bishop, favored by Pope Francis to attend the synod (even though unelected), [has now coauthored a book](#) that suggests moral approval of homosexual activity, and recognition of homosexual marriage:

There is no way we can continue to claim that there can be no other forms of love than heterosexual marriage. We find the same kind of love between a man and woman who live together, in homo-pairs and lesbian couples ... Should we not evolve towards a diversity of rituals in which we can recognize the loving relationship between homosexuals, even from the perspective of the Church and of the faith?

That’s where we are already arrived in just a year and it’s just the beginning. That a homosexual lobby exists in the power structures internal to the Church has long been recognized. Now these subverters of Catholic moral doctrine and pastoral practice are emboldened to think they have the tools to accomplish their objective, no matter what the cost. The Belgian bishop’s language ludicrously attempts to sound “moderate” in its goals—that is, merely compassion looking for solutions to the gray areas of moral life. But it’s a ruse.

For these neo-reformers, irreformable Church moral doctrine is just an abstraction and is no longer to be seen as binding in the formation of a *correct* conscience. As in the liberal Protestantism of our day, Church

moral teaching is to be effectively reduced to being but one among many equal considerations in the process of conscience formation. Indeed “a correct conscience” will no longer be a meaningful concept in the emerging new morality. In the end, norms will become merely “ideals,” treated with some abstract respect, but fundamentally useless if not largely meaningless.

The language of the Australian and Irish Archbishops is very telling as to where we are at and where we are headed. It is the path of Modern antinomian, liberal Anglicanism, and we should be clear about what that means. These two geographically distant archbishops speak in tandem of “a world of grays” and “gray areas”, which is language picked up from *Amoris Laetitia* (cf. AL, 306). The Irish Archbishop speaks blithely about “ideals” rather than commandments, and this too suggests the gradual movement away from moral absolutes toward desirable but generally unattainable moral ideas, at least for the vast majority of people.

To date there has been absolutely no practical guidance from the Supreme Authority of the Church as to just how local priests or bishops are to “accompany” people in the “discernment” process by which the laity will make a final judgment of conscience regarding the moral issue at hand, and about their spiritual readiness to receive the Eucharist. So what can we expect in this and other areas of pastoral activity? Thus the American bishop has done what many others will likely do under these circumstances by effectively turning the whole process over to each person’s private and subjective conscience. As Henry VIII says, “Does a man need a priest to tell him he has sinned?” And so it will not take long for people to ask, “Why bother with the internal forum of confession at all?”

Moral confusion and confusing equivalence

What problems and moral confusion could arise or have already arisen from using these new subjective principles to decided cases of conscience?

Regarding moral confusion, I recall that General Eisenhower once saw Nazi artifacts made from humans, including a lampshade, when he toured Buchenwald, and he was truly horrified. Just recently, an American Archbishop, another Cardinal of recent vintage, was equally repulsed by the selling of fetal (baby) body parts, reported back in 2015. However, he made a rather stunning statement that seemed to establish a kind of moral equivalence, indicated by an equivalence of his repulsion, regarding some quite different social and moral issues.

The moral confusion [in his statement](#) becomes rather obvious, if we just substitute the italicized words in the quote below for his original sentence which is: “While commerce in the remains of defenseless children is particularly repulsive ...”:

This newest evidence about the disregard for the value of human life also offers the opportunity to reaffirm our commitment as a nation to a consistent ethic of life. *While making lampshades and other artifacts from murdered Jewish victims is particularly repulsive*, we should be no less appalled by the indifference toward the thousands of people who die daily for lack of decent medical care; who are denied rights by a broken immigration system and by racism; who suffer hunger, joblessness and want; who pay the price of violence in gun-saturated neighborhoods; or who are executed by the state in the name of justice.

Now, here's an obvious question: would Jews who read such a statement think that *indifference* toward the moral/social evils the Archbishop listed is "no less repulsive," or that people should be "no less appalled" at the fact that some people suffer hunger or lack jobs, than at the fact that millions of their people were exterminated and their body parts used as lampshades? Such a comparison would be taken to clearly insinuate that these other evils are morally equivalent to what was done to the Jews by Nazis.

However, is not the real problem here the fact that the Archbishop simply "stepped over" the larger moral issue involved, that is, the murder of millions of unborn children, which is surely the supreme moral issue and should be what is most repulsive, and should appall us far more than even what happens to the body parts afterwards? If he had said that the death of tens of millions of unborn children should appall us, but we should be equally appalled by hunger and joblessness and lack of decent medical care, the absurdity would stand out immediately.

I think it is obvious that such moral confusion, on the part of a high Church official no less, is likely caused by (1) the effective ignoring of the grave intrinsic evil of such moral acts, and (2) a rather facile recourse to the shelter of subjective conscience and moral relativism. Such an approach to serious moral issues and pastoral problems is about to unleash a torrent of "internal forum of conscience" solutions to all contested moral issues. But the solutions to some problems may not all please the social justice warriors who don't seem to give a tinker's damn about an objective sexual morality.

For instance, how about these cases of conscience being settled in the internal forum of private conscience?

1. Jerry confesses that he refuses to hire other races in his business, and uses various subterfuges to avoid the law. His reason tells him that other races are definitely inferior and less educated. His conscience tells him this is perhaps sinful, but at most only venially sinful. So, does the priest simply accompany him, and if he persists in this deep-seated racism and injustice, simply tell him to follow his conscience, and then even absolve his other sins of adultery and the murder of a partner, for which he is genuinely repentant?

2. Max works for the local mob as an accountant and covers up from the government their illegal gains from prostitution, gambling, drugs, and loan sharking. He recognizes this is illegal, and is genuinely sorry for *having* to do it. However, his conscience tells him it is morally acceptable because his defection from the mob would almost certainly cause harm and maybe death to his family. Does the priest accompany him by simply telling him to follow his conscience and to receive Communion if he thinks he is not guilty of any serious sinning?

3. Joe mentions to his confessor that he has been embezzling from the diocese, and the sum is very substantial over the years. But his conscience doesn't judge it to be gravely wrong because he considers it occult compensation for the low salary they're paying him. So, does the priest merely accompany his discernment, avoid throwing abstract rules at him, and advise Joe to follow his own conscience, regardless of what the Church teaches, and receive communion if he feels it to be God's will for him? Of course, this would rule out any obligation of restitution should Joe remain adamant in his false conscience.

4. Finally, Pat is an IRA operative who specializes in blowing up things, including people. He's not happy about this, but he feels he has to defend Irish families, his own family, from the oppression of the British and the northern Protestants. He is sorry that innocent people sometimes die in his efforts to get at the British military, but he feels that his is a just cause and that this is what God wants him to do with his life at this time. His conscience tells him that what he is doing is a necessary but lesser evil—that is, necessary to protect his family and liberate his country. Should his confessor merely accompany him and assure him that if his conscience is clear and decided, he can go to communion?

The New Morality?

The new potential “cases of conscience” are obviously manifold, and they are now more likely to arise given the ambiguities that the 4 Cardinals desperately and sincerely want clarified (and evidently won't be). These good men realize that once this kind of “inviolability of the subjective conscience” becomes established in the pastoral practice of the church, what moral issue will not ultimately be resolved simply by an appeal to the subjective conscience?

But the overarching problem here is really the moral system itself that is underlying all this confusion. What we seem to be dealing with today is something like a moral modernism with its roots deep within a neo-Platonic kind of dualism. Just as the dogmatic modernist thought that dogmatic formulations are only verbal approximations of the divinely revealed truths, so in this moral idealism the commandments are to be understood as mere abstractions in a world of ideas, And when one brings these abstractions into the real world, they have to be understood simply as moral ideals which we can only begin to

approximate, or at least most people can only imperfectly strive for in their moral life.

It all seems to conveniently resolve the difficult moral issues for Catholics. If one verbally affirms the moral doctrine on absolutes, that is, as mere abstract ideas, that is sufficient for claiming orthodoxy. But in the practical world, it's necessary to translate these abstractions into vague moral ideals which people strive for but rarely completely fulfill.

Thus the pastoral task of the Church becomes not so much to teach the commandments as commandments, but merely as ideals, and then leave the rest to private conscience. It all sounds great, the triumph of mercy and compassion over moral legalism and rigidity. But in the end it opens the way to other conclusions that its proponents will not likely be at ease with in the future. I repeat, this approach cannot and will not be restricted to matters of the Sixth Commandment. It applies to all of them or to none of them. Thus "Thou Shall not Kill" will also be reduced, perhaps to the ideal of non-violence, but few people will find it possible to even approach that ideal in the real world. And so this new morality will go on eroding the moral order in ways that will horrify even the good men who are confidently advancing this new moral and pastoral system.

Finally, one other unfortunate effect of this approach to the moral order and pastoral practice of the Church will almost certainly be that recourse to the Sacrament of Penance and recourse to Church authorities for guidance will become even more obsolete in many places than they are already today. Again, as Henry VIII said, who

needs a priest, or the Church, to tell him he has sinned or not sinned?
Don't we all have a conscience?