

**“ONLY A BLIND MAN CAN DENY THAT THERE IS
GREAT CONFUSION IN THE CHURCH.”**

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An interview with Carlo Cardinal Caffarra about "Amoris Laetitia", the reasons for the dubia, criticisms of the 4 Cardinals, and "the division among shepherds"

CWR Staff

Cardinal Carlo Caffarra of Bologna, Italy, carries a book before the start of the morning session of the extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the family at the Vatican Oct. 8. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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“The division among shepherds is the cause of the letter that we wrote to Francis. [The division is] not its effect. Insults and threats of canonical sanctions are unworthy things.” “A Church with little attention to doctrine is not more pastoral, just more ignorant.”

Bologna - “I believe that some things must be clarified. The letter - and the attached dubia - were reflected on at length, for months, and were discussed at length among ourselves. For my part, they were prayed about at length before the Blessed Sacrament.” Cardinal Carlo Caffarra starts by saying this, before beginning a long conversation with *Il Foglio* on the now famous letter “of the four cardinals” sent to the Pope to ask him for clarification in relation to *Amoris Laetitia*, the exhortation which summed up the double Synod on the family, and which has unleashed much debate – not always with grace and elegance – [both] inside and outside the Vatican walls. “We were aware that the action we were taking was very serious. Our concerns were twofold. The first was not to scandalize the little ones in the faith. For us pastors, this is a fundamental obligation. The second concern was that no person, whether a believer or not a believer, should be able to find in the

letter expressions that even remotely could appear in the slightest lacking in respect towards the Pope. The final text, therefore, is the fruit of quite a lot of revisions: texts [were] revised, rejected, corrected.”

Having said all this, Caffarra enters into the matter. “What drove us to this action? A consideration of a general-structural nature and one of a contingent-circumstantial nature. Let us begin with the first. There exists for us cardinals a grave obligation to advise the Pope in the government of the Church. It is a duty, and duties oblige. Concerning [the consideration] of a more contingent nature, moreover, it is a fact – which only a blind man can deny – that there exists in the Church, a great confusion, uncertainty, and insecurity caused by some paragraphs of *Amoris laetitia*. In recent months, it is happening that on these fundamental questions regarding the sacramental economy (matrimony, confession and Eucharist) and the Christian life, some bishops have said A, others have said the contrary of A, with the intention of interpreting well the same texts.”

And “this is an undeniable fact, because facts are stubborn things, as David Hume said. The way out of this ‘conflict of interpretations’ was recourse to fundamental theological interpretative criteria, using those by which, I think, one can reasonably demonstrate that *Amoris laetitia* does not contradict *Familiaris consortio*. Personally, in public meetings with laity and priests, I have always followed this method.” This is not enough, observes the archbishop emeritus of Bologna. “We realized that this epistemological model was not sufficient. The conflict between these two interpretations continued. There was only one way to bring it to an end: to ask the author of the text which is interpreted in two contradictory ways, which [of them] is the correct interpretation. There is no other way. Subsequently, the problem arose of the way by which to appeal to the Pontiff. We chose a way that is very traditional in the Church, the so-called *dubia*.”

Why? “Because it was an instrument, in the case wherein, according to his sovereign judgment, the Holy Father wanted to respond, which did not require him [to do so] in elaborate or long responses. He only had to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ and to defer, as popes have often done, to trusted scholars (in [official] parlance: probati auctores) or to ask the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to issue a joint declaration with which to explain the Yes or No. It seemed to us the simplest way. The other question which arose was whether to do it in private or in public. We reasoned and agreed that it would be a lack of respect to make everything public right away. So it was done in private, and only once we had obtained certainty that the Holy Father would not respond did we decide to publicize it.”

It is on this one of the points that there is the most discussion, with related controversies of all sorts. Most recently, it was Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Muller, prefect of the former Holy Office, to judge the publication of the letter mistaken. Caffarra explains: “We interpreted the silence [of Pope Francis] as authorization to continue the theological dispute. And, furthermore, the problem so profoundly involves both the magisterium of the bishops (which, let us not forget, they exercise not by the delegation of the Pope, but by virtue of the sacrament which they have received) and [it involves] the life of the faithful. Both the one and the other have the right to know. Many [lay] faithful and priests were saying, ‘But you cardinals in a situation like this one have the obligation to intervene with the Holy Father. Otherwise why do you exist if not to assist the Pope in questions so grave as this?’ A scandal on the part of many of the faithful was beginning to grow, as though we cardinals were behaving like the dogs who did not bark about whom the prophet speaks. This is what is behind those two pages.”

Yet the criticisms rained down, even from fellow bishops and monsignors of the curia: “Some individuals continue to say that we are not being docile to the magisterium of the Pope. This is false and calumnious. We wrote to the Pope precisely because we did

not want to be indocile. I can be docile to the magisterium of the Pope if I know what the Pope is teaching in a matter of faith and of the Christian life. But this is exactly the problem: what the Pope is teaching on the fundamental points simply cannot be well understood, as the conflict of interpretations among bishops shows. We want to be docile to the magisterium of the Pope, but the magisterium of the Pope must be clear. None of us – says the archbishop emeritus of Bologna – wanted ‘to oblige’ the Holy Father to respond: in the letter, we spoke of [his] sovereign judgment. We simply and respectfully asked questions. In short, the accusations of [us] wanting to divide the Church do not deserve attention. The division, already existing in the Church, is the cause of the letter, not its effect. The things unworthy within the Church, however, above all in a context such as this, are the insults and threats of canonical sanctions.”

The foreword to the letter notes, “a grave disorientation and great confusion of many faithful regarding extremely important matters for the life of the Church.” In what do the disorientation and confusion consist, specifically? Caffarra answers: “I received a letter from a parish priest which is a perfect snapshot of what is happening. He wrote me, ‘In spiritual direction and in confession I do not know what to say anymore. To the penitent who says to me, *‘I live in every respect as a husband with a woman who is divorced, and now I approach the Eucharist,’* I propose a path, in order to correct this situation. But the penitent stops me and responds immediately, *‘Listen, Father, the Pope said that I can receive the Eucharist, without the resolution to live in continence.’* I cannot bear this kind of situation any longer. The Church can ask me anything, but not to betray my conscience. And my conscience objects to a supposed papal teaching to admit to the Eucharist, under certain circumstances, those who live *more uxorio* [as husband and wife] without being married.’ Thus wrote a parish priest. The situation of many pastors of souls, and I mean above all parish priests - observes the cardinal - is this: they find themselves

carrying a load on their shoulders that they cannot bear. This is what I am thinking of when I talk about a great disorientation. And I am speaking of parish priests, but many [lay] faithful are even more confused. We are talking about questions that are not secondary. It is not being discussed whether [eating] fish violates or does not violate [the law of] abstinence. These are most serious questions for the life of the Church and for the eternal salvation of the faithful. Never forget, this is the supreme law of the Church: the eternal salvation of the faithful, not other concerns. Jesus founded His Church so that the faithful would have eternal life and have it in abundance.”

The division to which Cardinal Carlo Caffarra refers originated primarily from the interpretation of the paragraphs of *Amoris laetitia* ranging from numbers 300 to 305. For many, including several bishops, here is found the confirmation of a change that is not only pastoral but also doctrinal. Others, however, [claim] that everything is perfectly integrated and in continuity with the previous magisterium. How does one escape from such disorientation? "I would specify two very important postulates. To think up a pastoral practice that is not founded and rooted in doctrine means to establish and to root pastoral practice in arbitrariness. A Church with little attention to the doctrine is not a more pastoral Church, but a more ignorant Church. The Truth of which we speak is not a formal truth, but a Truth that gives eternal salvation: *Veritas salutaris* [the Truth of salvation], in theological terms. Let me explain. There exists formal truth. For example, I want to know whether the longest river in the world is the Amazon or the Nile. It turns out that it is the Amazon River. This is a formal truth. Formal means that this knowledge does not have any relationship with the way that I can be free. Also, if the answer was the contrary, it would not change anything about the way that I can be free. But there are truths which I call ‘existential.’ If it is true - as Socrates had already taught - that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it, I state a truth that brings about my freedom to act in very

different way than if the contrary were true. When the Church speaks of truth - adds Caffara – she speaks of truth of the second type, that which, if obeyed in freedom, produces true life. When I hear it said that it is only a pastoral change, and not doctrinal, or it is thought that that the commandment which forbids adultery is a purely positive law which can be changed (and I think that no righteous person can believe this), instead, it means to admit that yes, generally a triangle has three sides, but there is the possibility of constructing one of them with four sides. This is, I say, an absurdity. After all, as the medievals once used to say, *theoria sine praxi, currus sine axi; praxis sine theoria, caecus in via* [theory without practice is a chariot with no axle; practice without theory is a blind man on the road].”

The second postulate that the archbishop of Bologna makes regarding "the great topic of the evolution of doctrine, which has always accompanied Christian thought. And we know that it was taken up in a splendid manner by Blessed John Henry Newman. If there is a clear point [in his writing], it is that there is no evolution, where there is a contradiction. If I say that S is P and then I say that S is not P, the second proposition does not develop the first one, but contradicts it. Aristotle had already rightly taught that to state a universal affirmative proposition (e.g. every [act of] adultery is wrongful), and at the same time a particular negative proposition having the same subject and predicate (e.g. some [acts of] adultery are not wrongful), does not establish an exception to the first. It contradicts it. In the end, if wanted to define the logic of the Christian life, I would use the expression of Kierkegaard: ‘Always keep moving, always remaining planted in the same place.’”

The problem, adds the cardinal, “is to see whether the famous paragraphs nos. 300-305 of *Amoris laetitia* and the famous footnote n. 351 are or are not in contradiction with the previous magisterium of the Pontiffs who have addressed the same question. According to many bishops, it is in contradiction. According to many other bishops, it is not a contradiction, but a development.

And it is because of this that we asked the Pope for a response." So, one arrives at the most contested point and that so animated the synodal discussions: the possibility of granting to divorced and civilly remarried readmittance to the Eucharist. A matter that does not explicitly find space in *Amoris laetitia*, but which in the judgment of many is an implicit fact that constitutes nothing more than an evolution compared to n. 84 of the exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* of John Paul II.

"The problem in the footnote [351] is the following," argues Caffara: "Can a minister of the Eucharist (usually a priest) give the Eucharist to a person who lives *more uxorio* [as husband and wife] with a woman or man who is not his wife or her husband, and does not intend to live in continence? There are only two answers: Yes or No. Anything else calls into question that *Familiaris Consortio*, *Sacramentum caritatis*, the Code of Canon Law and the Catechism of the Catholic Church answer No to the aforementioned question. A No [is] valid so long as the faithful does not resolve to leave the state of cohabitation *more uxorio* [as husband and wife]. Has *Amoris laetitia* taught that, given certain circumstances and having undertaken a certain journey, the faithful may be able to approach the Eucharist without committing themselves to continence? There are bishops who have taught that one can. As a simple question of logic, one must then also teach that adultery is not in and of itself evil. It is not relevant to appeal to ignorance or to error regarding the indissolubility of marriage, a fact [that is] unfortunately very widespread. This appeal has an interpretative value, not a [pastoral] policy one. It should be used as a method to discern the imputability of acts already committed, but it cannot be a principle for acts to be committed [in the future]. A priest - said the Cardinal - has the duty to enlighten the ignorant and to correct the errant."

"However, what *Amoris laetitia* has brought back to this question, is the call for the shepherds of souls not to content themselves with answering No (not contenting themselves, however, does not mean

answering Yes), but to take the person by the hand and to help him to grow, up to the point that he understands that he finds himself in such a condition that he cannot receive the Eucharist, unless he ceases from the intimacy proper to spouses. But it is not that a priest can say "the help [on] his path [can include] even giving him the sacraments'. And it is on this [point] that the text of footnote 351 is ambiguous. If I say to the person who cannot have sexual relations with him who is not her husband or his wife, but in the meantime, seeing that it takes such effort, one may have [sexual relations]... only once instead of three times per week, it make no sense; and I do not show mercy to this person. Because in order to put an end to a habitual behavior - a *habitus* [a habit], as the theologians say - it must be that there is a firm resolution not to do any act proper to that behavior. In the good, there is a [gradual] progress, but between leaving the evil and beginning to do the good, there is an instantaneous choice, even though long prepared. For a certain period, Augustine prayed: 'Lord, give me chastity, but not yet.' "

Glancing over the *dubia*, it seems to understand that perhaps more is at stake than *Familiaris Consortio*, there is *Veritatis Splendor*. Why is that? "Yes," replies Cardinal Caffara. "Here what *Veritatis Splendor* taught is in question. This encyclical (August 6, 1993) is a highly doctrinal document, in the intentions of Pope St. John Paul II, to the point that -an exceptional thing now in encyclicals - it is only addressed to the bishops as those responsible for the faith that must be believed and lived (cf. n. 5). To this end, the Pope tells them to be vigilant about the doctrines condemned or taught by the encyclical itself. The one [ie. true doctrines] because they are not widespread in the Christian communities, the other [ie. false doctrines] because they are being taught (cfr. n. 116). One of the fundamental teachings of the document is that there exist acts which can in and of themselves be considered wrongful, regardless of the circumstances in which they are committed and the purpose which the agent intends. He adds that denying this fact can lead to

denying the meaning of martyrdom (cf. Nn. 90-94). Every martyr, in fact, – stresses the retired archbishop of Bologna – could have been able to say: 'But I find myself in a circumstance ... in such situations for which the grave obligation to profess my faith, or to affirm the inviolability of a moral good, does not oblige me anymore.' Think about the difficulties that the wife of Thomas More put to her husband already sentenced to prison: 'You have duties to the family, to the children'. It is not, moreover, only a matter of faith. Even if I use only right reason, I see that by denying the existence of intrinsically evil acts, I deny that there exists a limit outside of which the powers of this world cannot and should not go. Socrates was the first in the West to understand this. The question, therefore, is grave, and on this [matter] uncertainties cannot be permitted. This is why we took the liberty of asking the Pope to give clarity, since there are bishops who seem to deny this fact, referring themselves to *Amoris laetitia*. Adultery, in fact, is always regarded among the intrinsically evil acts. It is enough to read what Jesus says in this regard, [as well as] St. Paul and the commandments given to Moses by the Lord." But is there now room, today, for acts considered "intrinsically evil?" Or, perhaps, is it time to look more to the other side of the scale, to the fact that all, before God, can be forgiven?

Pay attention, says Caffara: "Here, there is a great confusion. All sins and intrinsically evil choices can be forgiven. So 'intrinsically evil' does not mean 'unforgivable'. Jesus, however, does not content himself to say to the adulteress: 'Neither do I condemn you'. He also tells her: 'Go, and from now on, sin no more' (Jn. 8:10). St. Thomas, inspired by St. Augustine, makes a most beautiful comment, when he writes that 'He could have said: *go and live as you want and be certain of my forgiveness. In spite of all your sins, I will deliver you from the torments of hell*. But the Lord does not love sin and does not favor wrongdoing, and so he condemned her sin... saying, and from now on, sin no more. It shows, therefore, how the Lord is tender in his mercy and just in his Truth' (cf.

Commentary on the Gospel of John, 1139). We are truly, in a manner of speaking, free before the Lord. And therefore, the Lord does not force his forgiveness upon us. There must be a wondrous and mysterious marriage between the infinite mercy of God and the freedom of man, who must be converted if he wants to be forgiven."

We ask Cardinal Caffarra if a certain confusion does not also arise from the conviction, deeply-rooted even among so many pastors, that conscience is a faculty to decide autonomously regarding what is good and what is evil, and that in the end, the final word belongs to the conscience of the individual. "I retain that this is the most important point of all," he responds. "It is where we meet and clash with the central pillar of modernity. Let us begin by clarifying the language [that we are using]. Conscience does not decide, because it is an act of reason; the decision is an act of freedom, of the will. Conscience is a guide by which the subject of the proposition which expresses the choice which I am about to make or which I have already made, and the predicate is the moral qualification of the choice. It is, therefore, a judgment, not a decision. Naturally, every reasoned judgment is exercised in the light of criteria, otherwise it is not a judgment, but rather something else. A criterion is that on the basis of which I affirm what I affirm and deny what I deny. To this point, a passage of *the Tractate on moral conscience* by Blessed [Antonio] Rosmini proves to be particularly illuminating: 'There is a light that is in man and there is a light which is man. The light which is in man is the law of Truth and grace. The light that is man is right conscience, since man becomes light when he participates in the light of the law of Truth, while conscience meditates, confirmed by that light.' Now, this concept of moral conscience is opposed to the concept which erects one's own subjectivity as an unappealable tribunal of the goodness or the evil of one's own actions. Here, for me – says the cardinal – is the decisive clash between the vision of life that belongs to the Church

(because it belongs to divine Revelation) and the concept of conscience that belongs to modernity.

“He who saw this in the most lucid way – he adds - was Blessed [John Henry] Newman. In his famous *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, he said, ‘Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ, a prophet in its informations, a monarch in its peremptoriness, a priest in its blessings and anathemas, and, even though the eternal priesthood throughout the Church could cease to be, in it the sacerdotal principle would remain and would have a sway. Words such as these are idle empty verbiage to the great world of philosophy now. All through my day there has been a resolute warfare, I had almost said conspiracy against the rights of conscience, as I have described it.’ Further on, he adds that “in the name of conscience true conscience is being destroyed.” That is why among the five *dubia*, *dubium* number five is the most important. There is a passage of *Amoris laetitia*, at n. 303, which is not clear; it seems – I repeat: it seems – to admit the possibility that there is a true judgment of conscience (not invincibly erroneous; this has always been acknowledged by the Church) in contradiction to that which the Church teaches as pertaining to the deposit of divine Revelation. It seems. And so, we put the *dubium* to the Pope.”

“Newman – recalls Caffarra - says that ‘if the Pope were to speak against Conscience in the true sense of the word, he would commit a suicidal act. He would be cutting the ground from under his feet.’ These are matters of a disturbing gravity. It would elevate private judgment to the ultimate criterion of moral truth. Never say to a person: ‘Always follow your conscience’, without adding immediately and always: ‘Love and seek the truth about the good.’ You would be putting into his hands the weapon most destructive of his own humanity.”