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The Truth is Not Up for Negotiation

Cardinal Gerhard Muller, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is pictured in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican in this Nov. 19, 2014, file photo. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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Amoris Laetitia? "It should be read as a whole, in any case, adultery is always a mortal sin and the bishops who stir confusion on this should study for themselves the doctrine of the Church. We must help the sinner to overcome the sin and to repent." The unity of Christians? "It is important, but it cannot become relativism, one can not sell out the sacraments instituted by Jesus."

Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, weighs in with utmost clarity upon the hottest topics of ecclesial debate and beyond. We met him in the rooms from which he directs what once was the Holy Office, the place with custody of sound doctrine. We were greeted with great cordiality. His role of defender of Catholic orthodoxy, combined with an imposing physique and Teutonic [German] origins elicited a certain reverence, but it was quickly overcome by the Cardinal's cheerfulness and accessibility. We sit around the table; the theme is doctrine, the role it has in the Christian life, knowing we were broaching an unpopular topic.

Your Eminence, let us go straight to the heart of the question. What is doctrine?

Aristotle says at the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, that all men seek the truth. The nature of the intellect is love for the truth. That is why God gave us an intellect and will, the one ordered towards the truth and the other towards love as the center of existence of all being, of God himself in his nature. For us God is the origin and the end of our existence, and for this reason it is necessary to know what God has revealed: it is the most important thing for a human creature—to know from where I came and to where I am going, what it is the meaning of suffering, of death. It is a sign of a hope that goes beyond the limits we experience in our weak and finite lives. The Catechism tells us what to believe in the Creed, what to do in the Commandments, how to unite ourselves to God in faith, hope and charity, through the prayer (the Our Father), how to receive sanctifying grace in the seven sacraments. God has revealed Himself in His Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, and this means that we can participate in the knowledge that God has in himself: to know God is the first fundamental

dimension of the faith, because faith is not just a religious feeling, an irrational faith, but faith is first and foremost a knowledge of God. This does not

mean an empty intellectualism, because there is always a unity between knowing God and loving God. It is therefore in knowing a person intimately, with a willingness to accept who the Other Person is, who God is in His Trinitarian reality, a communion of love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Throughout all of life we need catechesis, a permanent introduction - both intellectual and with the heart - to the divine mysteries which are the mysteries of life. Doctrine, therefore, is the basis for the entire life of the Church, otherwise, the Church remains only a non-profit organization, a charitable organization like many others. The identity of the Church instead is to be the Body of Christ, called to lead all men to an encounter with God in this life and even unto eternal life. For this reason doctrine is absolutely necessary for salvation and for the everlasting happiness of man in God.

In recent decades, "doctrine" has not had what we might call "good press." It is often presented as a series of laws, unbearable weights on men's shoulders, moralizing about what one can or cannot do. What you are saying turns the question around.

This bad name doctrine receives is the inheritance of the rationalism of the eighteenth century. The claim that reason can understand everything in the world, but is powerless towards the transcendent, has reduced the faith to simply a good feeling for the simple-minded. Or instead, faith is seen as a subjective judgment that comes only after reason has recognized its limits. The philosophy of Immanuel Kant, for instance, denied the rational dimension of faith, reducing it to only a reference point for morality. And Revelation, therefore, becomes essentially superfluous. To answer these philosophical errors, the First Vatican Council in its constitution "*Dei Filius*" has already clearly set out the mutual relationship between reason and faith, starting from reason's capacity for going beyond the senses. Hence, in Catholic theology we must reaffirm that faith is a participation in the *Logos* of God, and for this reason it is always necessary to emphasize the rationality of the act of faith. This is an important need for our time, which claims to know everything about the subject and seems almost proud of being ignorant regarding those questions which are capable of giving meaning to existence. Faith makes us believe in God in the light of the Incarnate Word and by the power of the Holy Spirit through the testimony of the Church (the Bible, Tradition and the Magisterium).

Unfortunately, we know that men of the Church do not always reflect this truth. There are also very serious scandals. How can one distinguish between the "treasure of the Gospel" and the "clay vessels" that carry it?

There were, there are and there always will be scandals. As Jesus said, "It is impossible that scandals do not happen", but he also added: "Woe to him by whom they

come!" (Luke 17:1). We must first of all distinguish between the scandals that arise from the moral life and those of the intellectual one, when one behaves as a heretic or a schismatic, against the truth and unity. In general, in our maturity in faith, we believe in God even when the minister of the Word shows himself unworthy of his mission. In the third century there were great discussions in the case of Augustine

(354-430) against the Donatists, who believed that the sacraments did not have a dignity in themselves, but that their validity depended on the dignity of those who administered them. It was a great challenge for the faith: how is it possible that one who is not "holy" in his moral or intellectual life can confer grace? Augustine, with the whole Church, held that the grace of God does not depend upon us who are its instruments. The other extreme would be, as in certain currents of Protestant reform, of totally denying the human mediation of the Church. St. Thomas said that just as God sends us his grace through simple signs - such as, for example, the water for Baptism - so also He himself confers his grace through the instrument of man and not an angel. This has to do with our nature which is bodily, social, historical. Therefore, we must accept the humility of Christ who has come in our flesh and wanted to confer his grace through the "flesh" of the apostles and their successors, bishops and priests.

We are called to accept this concreteness of grace. We cannot expect to choose a Pope, a bishop, a parish priest from a kind of catalog, as if there were a personal desire to satisfy. We must live the concreteness of reality as it is given to us and accept the contingency of human existence.

Yet today in the Church emphasis is often put on the fact of its being credible...

Credibility is certainly necessary, but in what does the credibility of the Church consist? The Church does not lose credibility when some priests fall into sin, we all can fall into sin, but when these ones abuse their authority in sinning. Thus, they deliberately undermine the mission of the Church, but it is not a self-referential credibility: the ministers of God are just instruments, and they are called to be faithful to the mission for which God himself has called them.

It is often said, rightly, that the faithful should listen to the Word. But commonly the Word tends to be identified with Sacred Scripture. Is this not a reductive vision of the Word of God?

Certainly. We are not a religion of the book, but of the Word predicated upon Jesus Christ and the Word of God in His own Person. Jesus did not write Sacred Scripture, He is the living Word of God. The Holy Scripture is the first and fundamental testimony of the Word of Jesus Christ, but in the context of the testimony of faith of the apostles and the early Church. The Church is the receiver of the Word, and that Word is now present in the knowledge of the faith of the Church, but understood not as a simple archive, but as a search within the living heart of the Church, which finds, in the passing of generations, that same Word. A Word understood only as Sacred Scripture is

reductive and not Catholic. Unfortunately, Protestantism wanted to debase the value of the living tradition of the Church. Revelation is certainly present in the Bible in a unique and fundamental way, but [it is present] also in the life of the Church, in the writings of the Fathers, in the great councils, in the sacramental life. The sacraments are not simply a memory, there Christ is present, truly and concretely.

If these things are so, in view of unity among Christians, doctrine seems to become an obstacle. Just think of the seven sacraments ...

For us the seven sacraments are not a problem. Certainly, we have no need to justify ourselves for having these seven sacraments, since their recognition came from the life of the Church. For the Catholic Church these seven signs not only signify the grace, but effect the grace. The ones who should justify themselves are the Protestants who have denied all this. One cannot claim to accept tradition only up to a certain date, as if the Holy Spirit after the Council of Chalcedon had disappeared from the life of the Church. We must say that today there are also ecumenical movements that have somehow passed over this "isolation" of the Bible, but we must always remember that without the living context of the Church guided by the Holy Spirit, Scripture ends up being just an archival document. Faith is not built upon archives. In order to know the revealed faith, one must turn to the Church, not an archive.

So the differences between the Catholic Church and other Christian confessions are not, so to speak, empty apologetic rigidities?

The Protestant reformation must not be understood simply as a reform of some moral abuses, but we need to recognize that it went on to affect the core of the Catholic concept of Revelation. How is it possible that the Church has taught for 1500 years that these sacraments are necessary for the faith, and they find, instead, that the Church had led millions of believers into error? Did the founder of the Church leave it in the dark for centuries upon centuries? The Church would have guided people to hell, this cannot be granted. One can always reform the moral life, our institutions, universities, pastoral structures, it is necessary also to be rid of a certain "worldliness" of the Church: we can accept all this from elements of the Protestant Reformation, but we must say that for us there are dogmatic errors among the reformers that we can never accept. With Protestants the problem lies not only in the number of the sacraments, but also in their meaning. Ecumenism can not advance with relativism or indifference toward the doctrinal issues: to seek unity, we cannot agree to "give away" two or three sacraments, or accept that the Pope is a kind of president of the different Christian confessions.

Another topical controversy today is the relationship between doctrine and personal conscience.

Everyone must follow their conscience, but conscience is a term that expresses a rapport, a relationship - not with me to myself, but towards the Other. Conscience stands in the presence of another and for us, clearly, this other can only be God, who is

our Creator and Savior, and who has given us the commandments not to make us angry, or to control us, but to illuminate the path. The commandments are a guidance to the Good, to reach our end: they are the way, but also the goal. This applies to morality, but also to doctrine, because we have knowledge of truth when we as men understand that we must *ob-audire* (to listen while standing in the presence of) the Word of God which illuminates. They are transcendent truths which go beyond our capacity, but with the help of grace we have this capacity to understand that which God has said to us and which illuminates the path. I know that I have been called unto an eternal relationship of my person with the Person of God. This encounter, obviously, is also in the moral life. Men are called to choose between good and evil. Even animals kill other animals, but we are confronted with the question of whether

this is good or bad. I know by the nature of my conscience that I ought to do good and avoid evil, this is the fundamental judgment of the law inscribed by nature in our beings, and for us Christians this is expressly stated in the Ten Commandments and the evangelical Beatitudes. The Holy Spirit tells us this, who is poured into our hearts, and who illuminates the mind and comforts the will.

But cannot there be a contradiction between doctrine and personal conscience?

No, that is impossible. For example, it cannot be said that there are circumstances in which an act of adultery does not constitute a mortal sin. For Catholic doctrine, coexistence between mortal sin and sanctifying grace is impossible. In order to overcome this absurd contradiction, Christ has instituted for the faithful the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation with God and with the Church.

There is a question which is being much discussed with regard to the internal debate about the post-synodal exhortation *Amoris laetitia*.

Amoris Laetitia must clearly be interpreted in the light of the whole doctrine of the Church. The sacrament of Penance can accompany us to the sacramental communion with Jesus Christ, but some human acts, guided by the Spirit, are essential parts of the sacrament of Penance, which must be respected: contrition of heart, the resolution not to sin again, the accusation of sins and satisfaction. When one of these elements is lacking, or the penitent does not accept them, the sacrament is not effected. This is the dogmatic teaching of the Church, regardless of whether people can accept it or not. We are called to help people, little by little, to reach the fullness of their relationship with God, but we cannot make concessions. I do not like it, it is not right that so many bishops are interpreting *Amoris laetitia* according to their own way of understanding the teaching of the Pope. This does not follow the line of Catholic doctrine. The magisterium of the pope is interpreted only by himself or by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Pope interprets the bishops, it is not for the bishops to interpret the pope, this would constitute an inversion of the structure of the Catholic Church. To all these who are speaking excessively, I urge them to first study the doctrine on the papacy and on the episcopate in the two Vatican Councils, without

forgetting the doctrine of the seven sacraments (the Fourth Lateran Council, the Council of Florence, the Council of Trent and Vatican II). The Bishop, as Teacher of the Word, must himself be well-formed first lest he fall into the risk of the blind leading the blind. Thus, says the letter to Titus: The Bishop “must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it.” (Titus 1:9).

But in this regard the possibility of the development of doctrine is often spoken of. How should this development be understood?

The Church is a living body, the development is a movement to understand better the depths of the mysteries. But it is not possible to overturn statements of the magisterium when it comes to statements that concern the revealed divine and Catholic faith. Revelation is complete in Jesus Christ and is present in the *deposit of faith* of the apostles. We have many reflections on the issue of the development of

doctrine, like for example, that of Blessed John Henry Newman, or the one offered by the same Joseph Ratzinger. Here we can find expressed the significance of the development of doctrine in the Catholic sense, to defend themselves from the evolutionary modernism on the one hand and from fixism on the other. One ought to grant a homogeneous development in continuity and not in rupture. What is dogmatically defined cannot be denied in any way; if the Church has said that there are seven sacraments, no one, not even a council could be able to reduce or change the number or the meaning of these sacraments. He who wants to unite himself to the Catholic Church must accept the seven sacraments as means of salvation. The foundation for the homogeneity of the development of dogma is the preservation of the basic principles: Arianism is not a development of the dogma of the Incarnation, but a corruption of the faith. Thus, the Church has clearly expressed the recognition of marriage as an indissoluble union between a man and a woman. Polygamy, for example, is not a development of monogamy, but a corruption of it. For this reason, we can say that *Amoris laetitia* wants to help people who live in a situation that is not in accord with the moral and sacramental principles of the Catholic Church and who want to overcome this irregular situation. But one certainly cannot legitimize those who are in this situation. The Church can never legitimize a situation that is not in accord with the divine will.

The exhortation of Saint John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, provides that divorced and remarried couples that cannot separate, in order to be able to approach the sacraments must commit themselves to live in continence. Is this obligation still valid?

Certainly, it is not negotiable, because it is not only a positive law of John Paul II, but he expressed what is an essential element of Christian moral theology and the theology of the sacraments. The confusion on this point also concerns the failure to accept the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, with its clear doctrine of the *intrinsece malum* [intrinsic

evil]. Let us say in general that no human authority can accept what is against the manifest will of God, his commandments and the constitution of the sacrament of marriage. Let us remember that marriage is a sacramental bond that is imprinted almost like the nature of baptism, as long as spouses are alive this marriage bond is indelible. On this the words of Jesus are very clear and their interpretation is not an academic interpretation, but the Word of God. No one can change it. We must not surrender to the worldly spirit that would like to reduce marriage to a private reality. Today we see how States want to introduce a definition of marriage that has nothing to do with the definition of natural marriage, and we must also remember that for Christians the requirement to get married in the form of the Church matters, saying ‘yes’ for forever and only to an exclusive ‘you.’ For us, marriage is the expression of participation in the unity between Christ the bridegroom and the Church his bride. This is not, as some said during the Synod, a simple vague analogy. No! This is the substance of the sacrament, and no power in Heaven or on Earth, neither an angel, nor the Pope, nor a council, nor a law of the bishops, has the power to change it.

How can one resolve the chaos that is being generated on account of the different interpretations that are being given of this passage of *Amoris laetitia*?

I urge everyone to reflect, studying the doctrine of the Church first, starting from the Word of God in Sacred Scripture, which is very clear on marriage. I would also advise not to enter into any casuistry that can easily create misunderstandings, above all that one according to which if love dies, then the marriage bond is dead. These are sophistries: the Word of God is very clear and the Church does not accept the secularization of marriage. The task of priests and bishops is not that of creating confusion, but of bringing clarity. One cannot refer only to little passages present in *Amoris laetitia*, but one must read everything as a whole, with the purpose of making the Gospel of marriage and the family more attractive for people. It is not *Amoris laetitia* that has provoked a confused interpretation, but some confused interpreters of it. Everyone must understand and accept the doctrine of Christ and his Church, and at the same time be ready to help others to understand it and put it into practice even in difficult situations. Marriage and the family are the fundamental cell of the Church and of society, in order to restore hope to a humanity affected by a strong nihilism, it is necessary that this cell be healthy.

A TEMPTATION: THE CULT OF PERSONALITY

By Rev. Jerry J. Pokorsky

By the grace-filled cooperation of individuals within the organization called “the Catholic Church,” we come to know Jesus Christ and His Way. The Church has no army divisions; no tanks; no hellfire missiles; just Christ, His Mystical Body, Sacraments, and saving message.

In a sense, the “Cult of Jesus” is the only authentic “cult of person” in all human history. All other “cults of person” (to distinguish from the Person of Christ, call them “cults of personality”), when not resisted, easily become forms of narcissism.

The Incarnation has logical consequences. If God truly became man and dwelt among us, it means He is a man with flesh and blood with all the limitations of time and space associated with His earthly humanity. He comes in peace and freedom. But He’s not superman, or the Terminator, or Robocop. Hence, in God’s providence, even Christ as man “depends” upon our free response to His teaching (always acknowledging the hidden working of God’s grace). Jesus does not force us. He persuades by the power of who He is and what He does and says.

God needs helpers because Jesus, the Word incarnate, is “only one man.” “And he called the twelve; and began to send them two and two, and gave them power over unclean spirits.” (Mark 6:7). Then He enlists the seventy-two disciples and sends them out on His behalf. Such was the beginning of what would become the Church, the “Mystical Body of Christ.”

After the Ascension and the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the message and cult of Jesus needed to be handed down in time, over the centuries. Evangelization is not automatic or magical, but requires our cooperation (in our highly individual roles) guided by God’s grace. The accounts of the mighty deeds of Christ and His teaching are proclaimed, committed to writing, and handed down from generation to generation. Jesus doesn’t work alone. By nature and Divine design, the spread of His “cult of Person” needs the people and structures of the Church.

But “cults of personality” – without God or the Person of Christ – always end in destruction. Wise kings rule with God’s justice, but their rule becomes lawless and ultimately self-destructive when it devolves into a “cult of personality.” The rule of King Solomon held out great promise, but ended badly because he forgot about the source of his legendary wisdom. The bloody history of the 20th Century reveals many attempts to foster political cults of personality, all failing badly, but bringing great death and destruction.

Religions, great and small, can be prone to engender false and potentially destructive “cults of personality” as well. Horrors like the Jonestown mass murder are easily seen. But there is plenty of evidence of alarming “cult of personality” problems emerging from within the Church herself.

Father Charles Coughlin (the social justice “Radio Priest” of the 1930s) and Fulton J. Sheen (whose TV ratings exceeded that of comedian Milton Berle) were real-life “celebrity priests.” By contrast, the popes of their day – custodians of the Church’s Magisterium – were dull and not particularly entertaining.

Then Pope John XXIII and later Pope John Paul II emerged as “celebrity popes” with unprecedented public appeal. JPII accomplished much in the geopolitical world and advanced Catholic orthodoxy at a time when dissent within the Church was widespread and very destructive. Like Fulton Sheen and John XXIII, John Paul used his popularity in the service of the Gospel; the name of Jesus was frequently on his lips. But the popular appeal of the modern clerical celebrity also set the stage for a serious displacement of the Person of Christ.

Blame Bing Crosby in part. In his 1944 movie classic, “Going My Way” Crosby’s character – Fr. Chuck O’Malley – had little to do with Christ. It had everything to do with a charismatic priest reaching out to youth by the power of his talent and personality. The film became very popular and – in an unintended way – arguably changed the way popular culture views ministers of the Gospel. We now tend to demand charismatic and “vibrant” priests often at the expense of the difficult truths of the Faith.

The immensely popular John the Baptist chose to “decrease” so that Christ would “increase.” (John 3:30) Today, there is a pronounced tendency for many ministers of the Gospel to promote their own “cult of personality,” becoming clerical entertainers, with Jesus and His sacred Name effectively choked off by narcissism. The temptation doesn’t stop with ordinary priests. Increasingly, we hear speeches by high-ranking prelates in which the name of Jesus is never mentioned. During his visit to America, Pope Francis addressed Congress, the United Nations, and Independence Hall, and the name of Jesus was not heard in the over 8,000 words of his three speeches.

The Catholic faith is not about rulers, popes, bishops, priests – or even saints, as necessary as these are to the machinery and mission of the Church. The Faith is fundamentally about knowing and loving Christ and living His Way unto salvation. A cleric’s narcissism may be entertaining for a time, but can never save. The narcissist, through his own perverted “cult of personality,” obstructs the view of Christ. And he needs to get out of the way.

The narcotic of vainglory and its warm sensation can be terribly addictive. So we can begin to break the allure by recognizing that all clerical authority comes from Christ alone. The same goes for those of us in the sacred ministry: in preaching and conversation, frequently placing the name of Jesus reverently on our lips.

“Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place, and gave Him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9-11)

Jesus Christ, in Whom we live, move and have our being, the only name by which we can be saved.