



Archbishop Chaput's column

A letter to the Romans



Archbishop Charles
Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.

By Archbishop Charles Chaput, O.F.M. Cap. • Posted July 6, 2017

Christians are always, in a sense, *outsiders*. We have the joy and privilege to be a leaven for good in society. That's an exhilarating vocation. It means working for as much justice and virtue in human affairs as we can. We have a special obligation to serve the weak and the poor, and to treat even those who hate us with love.

But while we're in the world and for the world, we're never finally *of* the world. And we need to understand what that means.

Writing in the mid-first century to "all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints" — and despite the dangers and frustrations he himself faced — St. Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed ..." (Rom 1:7, 16-17).

Paul's Letter to the Romans became a key text of the New Testament. The Church has always revered it as part of the inspired Word of God and incorporated it into her thought and practice. The books of Scripture, even when they're morally demanding, are not shackles. They're part of God's story of love for humanity. They're guide rails that lead us to real dignity and salvation.

That's a good thing. Much of human history – far too much — is a record of our species' capacity for self-harm. The Word of God is an expression of his mercy. It helps us to become the people of integrity God created us to be. As Paul reminds us, we're "called to be saints."

Sometimes Scripture's lessons toward that end can be hard. But God cannot lie. His Word always speaks the truth. And the truth, as Jesus tells us in the Gospel, makes us free. This is why Christians must never be ashamed of God's Word – even when it's inconvenient.

Which brings us to the heart of my comments this week.

In Romans 1:21-27, speaking of the men and women of his time "who by their wickedness suppress the truth," Paul wrote:

"...for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools...."

"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."

"For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error."

If reading that passage makes us uneasy, it should. Many of Paul's Roman listeners had the same response. Jesus didn't come to affirm us in our sins and destructive behaviors – whatever they might be — but to redeem us. Paul's message was as resented in some quarters then as it is now. In an age of sexual confusion and disorder, calls to chastity are not just unwelcome. They're despised. But that doesn't diminish the truth of the words Paul wrote, or their urgency for our own time.

What we do with our bodies *matters*. Sex is linked intimately to human identity and purpose. If our lives have no higher meaning than what we invent for ourselves, then sex is just another kind of modeling clay. We can shape it any way we please. But if our lives *do* have a higher purpose – and as Christians, we find that purpose in the Word of God — then so does our sexuality.

Acting in ways that violate that purpose becomes a form of self-abuse; and not just self-abuse, but a source of confusion and suffering for the wider culture. The fact that an individual's body might incline him or her to one sort of damaging sexual behavior, or to another very different sort, doesn't change this.

This can be a difficult teaching. It's easy to see why so many people try to finesse or soften or ignore Paul's words. In a culture of conflict, accommodation is always the least painful path. But it leads nowhere. It inspires no one. "Fitting in" to a society of deeply dysfunctional sexuality results in the ruin that we see in so many other dying Christian communities.

In his recent book "Building a Bridge" (HarperOne), Father James Martin, S.J., calls the Church to a spirit of respect, compassion and sensitivity in dealing with persons with same-sex attraction. This is good advice. It makes obvious sense. He asks the same spirit from persons in the LGBT community when dealing with the Church. Father Martin is a man whose work I often admire. "Building a Bridge," though brief, is written with skill and good will.

But what the text regrettably lacks is an engagement with the *substance* of what divides faithful Christians from those who see no sin in active same-sex relationships. The Church is not simply about unity – as valuable as that is – but about unity in God’s love rooted in truth.

If the Letter to the Romans is true, then persons in unchaste relationships (whether homosexual or heterosexual) need conversion, not merely affirmation. If the Letter to the Romans is false, then Christian teaching is not only wrong but a wicked lie. Dealing with this frankly is the only way an honest discussion can be had.

And that honesty is what makes another recent book – “Why I Don’t Call Myself Gay” by Daniel Mattson (Ignatius) – so extraordinarily moving and powerful. As Cardinal Robert Sarah writes in the Foreword, Mattson’s candor about his own homosexuality, his struggles and failures, and his gradual transformation in Jesus Christ “bears witness to the mercy and goodness of God, to the efficacy of his grace, and to the veracity of the teachings of his Church.”

In the words of Daniel Mattson himself:

“We cannot remain reluctant to speak about the beauty of the Church’s teaching on sexuality and sexual identity for fear that it will appear ‘unloving,’ ‘irrational,’ or ‘unreal.’ We need to love the world enough to speak about the Christian vision of sexual reality, confident that God’s creation of man as male and female is truly part of the Gospel of Jesus Christ we are called to proclaim to a lost and confused world.

“We need to be a light for the world and speak passionately about the richness of the Church’s understanding of human sexuality. We can’t place the Good News of the Church’s teaching on human sexuality under a bushel any longer, for the world desperately needs the truth we have (p. 123).”

Spoken from experience. Spoken from the heart. No one could name the truth more clearly.

© 2017 Catholic Philly

The Extraordinary Synod of 1985

[Eduardo J. Echeverria](#)

MONDAY, JULY 10, 2017

In 1985, on the twentieth anniversary of the close of Vatican II, John Paul II convened an extraordinary assembly of the Synod of Bishops with the aim of encouraging a deeper reception and implementation of the Council. The Synod set forth, in the document *A Message to the People of God and The Final Report*, a proper framework for interpreting the Conciliar texts. In particular, six hermeneutical principles for sound interpretation of these texts were set forth.

All would-be interpreters of Vatican II, who make claims about what the Council actually teaches, should adhere to these principles. These hermeneutical principles are important, particularly in our time, since we seem to be living in an ecclesial culture where some are suffering from amnesia about the invaluable contributions of John Paul II and Benedict XVI to the authoritative interpretation of Vatican II.

Massimo Faggioli, for one, claims that Pope Francis “perceives Vatican II as a matter not to be reinterpreted or restricted, but implemented.” Unlike his predecessors, adds Faggioli, Francis has “shown a full and unequivocal reception of Vatican II.” Another commentator, Richard Gaillardetz, claims that “Francis wishes to release Vatican II’s bold vision from captivity.”

I have [elsewhere](#) discussed the various types of Vatican II interpretations. Here, I will briefly explain the principles postulated by the 1985 synod for interpreting Vatican II texts:

1. The theological interpretation of the Conciliar doctrine must show attention to all the documents, in themselves and in their close inter-relationship, in such a way that the integral meaning of the Council’s affirmations – often very complex – might be understood and expressed.

2. The four “constitutions” of the Council (those on liturgy, the Church, revelation, and the Church in the modern world) are the hermeneutical key to the other documents – namely, the Council’s nine decrees and three declarations.
3. The pastoral import of the documents ought not to be separated from, or set in opposition to, their doctrinal content.
4. No opposition may be made between the spirit and the letter of Vatican II.
5. The Council must be interpreted in continuity with the great tradition of the Church, including earlier councils. The Church is one and the same throughout all the councils.
6. Vatican II should be accepted as illuminating the problems of our own day.

The hermeneutical norm of the first and second principles is twofold: one, *intratextuality*, meaning thereby interpreting the meaning of a particular passage within the context of the whole document; and two, *intertextuality*, meaning thereby interpreting any specific document in the context of the whole body of documents, particularly attending to the authoritative priority of the constitutions. The third principle states the unity and interdependence of the doctrinal and pastoral dimensions of the council documents.



This third principle is particularly important today where some Catholic theologians, such as Gaillardetz and Christoph Theobald, S.J., advance a so-called “pastoral orientation of doctrine.” That orientation is historicist in perspective. It collapses the dogmatic distinction of unchanging truth and its formulations into a historical context, meaning thereby, as Theobald puts it, “subject to continual reinterpretation according to the situation of those to whom it is transmitted.”

This historicist turn in a pastoral-oriented model of doctrinal change results in a model in which both truth itself and its formulations are subject to reform and continual reinterpretation and re-contextualization.

This model of perpetual hermeneutics is such that, as Gaillardetz says, “doctrine changes when pastoral contexts shift and new insights emerge [because] particular doctrinal formulations no longer mediate the saving message of God’s transforming love.”

Both Gaillardetz and Theobald, then, historicize the meaning and truth of dogma by expanding the meaning of pastoral. In essence, this approach brings into question the meaning of doctrines as objectively true affirmations. Although I cannot argue the point here, this view leaves Christian orthodoxy defenseless against historicism. The fourth principle pertains to the relationship between the “spirit” of Vatican II and its “texts,” that is, the “letter.” The former refers to the deep motivating force of the Council to revitalize the Church, biblical interpretation, and theology, by way of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*.

The Council did not take *aggiornamento* as an isolated motive for renewal. Kevin Vanhoozer rightly says, “*Ressourcement* describes a return to authoritative sources for the sake of revitalizing the present. . . . To retrieve is to look back creatively in order to move forward faithfully.” And this faithful movement forward cannot be done without affirming the normativity of the “letter” of the texts, of the literal sense of Vatican II documents, as the point of reference of Catholic theology and life.

This principle is a segue to the sixth principal, namely, Vatican II illuminates contemporary problems.

The fifth principle is also particularly important today given the “development” that some claim to find in the pastoral orientation of *Amoris Laetitia*. As Gerhard Cardinal Müller, for one, has stressed, the unclear passages in chapter eight of Pope Francis’s post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation (nos. 295-308) must be interpreted in continuity with the great tradition of the Church, including the documents of Vatican II, as well as earlier encyclicals, such as John Paul II’s *Veritatis splendor*.

Yes, *Amoris Laetitia* reaffirms or confirms definitive doctrine infallibly taught regarding marriage and family by the ordinary universal Magisterium of the Church. Much of what Francis says in

Amoris Laetitia formally attests to truth already possessed and infallibly transmitted by the Church.

But that isn't the case with respect to the possibility of opening up Communion to the divorced and civilly remarried, as some episcopal conferences throughout the world have claimed.

To discern whether this possibility is a legitimate or an illegitimate development must be decided, as always, in light of ecclesial warrants, such as Holy Scripture, Church councils, creeds and confessions, theological doctors of the Church, Christian faithful (*sensus fidei*), and the past normative exercise of the Magisterium. Without those sources, there is no sure and stable guide to Catholic truth.