

Cardinal Burke on the Rule of Faith

Fr. Gerald E. Murray

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Raymond Cardinal Burke gave a powerful [interview](#) ^[1] to Edwin Pentin of the *National Catholic Register* earlier this week. He explained why he continues to seek authoritative clarity on the meaning of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (AL) by asking Pope Francis to respond to the five *dubia* that he and three other cardinals submitted well over a year ago.

Cardinal Burke spoke about a problem with AL's opening up of exceptions (*footnote 351*) to the Church's refusal to admit divorced and remarried Catholics to the reception of Holy Communion. The main problem, he believes, concerns our understanding of the nature of the sacraments:

The decisive criterion for admission to the sacraments has always been the coherence of a person's way of life with the teachings of Jesus. If instead the decisive criterion were now to become the absence of a person's subjective culpability – as some interpreters of *Amoris Laetitia* have suggested – would this not change the very nature of the sacraments? In fact, the sacraments are not private encounters with God, nor are they means of social integration into a community. Rather, they are visible and effective signs of our incorporation into Christ and his Church, in and by which the Church publicly professes and actuates her faith. Thus, by turning a person's subjective diminished culpability or lack of culpability into the decisive criterion for the admission to the sacraments, one would endanger the very *regula fidei*, the rule of faith, which the sacraments proclaim and actuate not only by words, but also by visible gestures.

The worthy reception of Holy Communion presupposes that one believes what the Church teaches about the nature of the Holy Eucharist, that it is the Body and Blood of Christ. Hence, it is God's gift of Himself to his chosen friends.

Also presupposed for worthy reception of Holy Communion is that one is living one's life according to the law laid down by Christ and taught by His Church. The Lord said: "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery." (Lk 16:18) The only faithful and morally praiseworthy response of a believer to this divine teaching is never to do that.

Cardinal Burke (right) with Cardinal Walter Brandmüller (9/16/17, Edward Pentin photo)

If, however, a Catholic were for some reason to enter into such an adulterous public union by attempting a second marriage, the Church in her charity must remind him of his grave violation of the word of the Lord. Any claim by the civilly remarried Catholic that his conduct is not gravely sinful because he “cannot at this time” live up to the demands of Christ’s law should be greeted with a charitable and unwavering reminder that no one is obliged to commit mortal sin – that God calls him to refrain from sin, and gives him the grace to do so.

It is up to him to cooperate with that grace. If he continues to commit acts of adultery with someone he civilly married after ceasing to cohabit with his wife, knowing that God does not want him to do so, he is responsible before God and the Church for public defiance of God’s will in a grave matter.

For anyone in the Church to countenance, tolerate, or in any way approve of that man’s continued living in a state of sin, in which he knowingly commits acts of adultery, is a monumental betrayal of the Lord’s call to admonish and assist sinners to “go and sin no more.” (Jn 8:11) The Church’s shepherds must never tell the wandering sheep to keep wandering in fields of grave immorality, but rather draw them back to the green pastures of truth and holiness where sin is rejected, not somehow justified.

Cardinal Burke identifies another troubling aspect of the debate about *AL*, namely that the Holy Eucharist is treated by some as a “means of social integration into a community.” Holy Communion is not a token of public recognition as a member of the Church by the Church’s shepherds. If that were the case, then any denial of Holy Communion to anyone would be equivalent to throwing someone out. One enters the Church by baptism, and that can never be undone. Thus a baptized Catholic is always a member of the Church, his membership cannot disintegrate or end because his baptism cannot be undone.

The canonical penalty of excommunication does not involve throwing someone out of the Church, but rather penalizing him by depriving him of certain goods that the Church administers in order to call him to repentance. Membership in the Church includes the obligation to live in communion with God by living according to God’s law. Those who live that law more perfectly are holier than

other believers, but they are not in some way more a member of the Church.

Likewise, those who fail to live a holy way of life are still members of the Church. Those who turn themselves away from God's law in serious matters need to know that they are failing in their primary duty to God, which is to worship him "in spirit and in truth." (Jn 4:24) They do not need to be told that perhaps they can invoke in advance a claim of inculpability for grave sin by virtue of a supposed inability to do what God asks them to do.

The Christian life is about living in the truth that sets us free. (Jn 8:32) Christ's truth about divorce, remarriage, and adultery sets us free from a sinful way of life. The duty of the Church is to proclaim that truth by all available means. Any pastoral approach that would encourage people to continue to live in contradiction to that truth by claiming that some sinners cannot stop sinning is profoundly erroneous. Rather, we must in charity say to those in adulterous unions: cease such behavior, and until you do so, the Church will not give you Holy Communion. That is the most loving thing we can do for those caught in the web of sin.

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[1] interview: <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/edward-pentin/cardinal-burke-addresses-the-dubia-one-year-after-their-publication>

[2] Image: <https://www.staroftheseabooks.com>

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