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Cardinals Submit Dubia to Francis over Synod: ‘Statements ... Contrary to Doctrine’

CV NEWS FEED // Five cardinals revealed early Monday that they had submitted five questions (“Dubia”) to Pope Francis regarding “statements on serious matters contrary to the doctrine of the Church multiplying” ahead of the culmination of the pope’s Synod on Synodality.

Francis had not satisfactorily answered their questions, the cardinals revealed, but had responded in a way that only increased their concerns.

“In view of the Synod, due to the statements on serious matters contrary to the doctrine of the Church multiplying, we cardinals asked the Pope for clarification, but he did not respond,” wrote the cardinals. “Therefore, we have now decided to make our letter public so that the faithful do not fall into error.”

The cardinals who authored the Dubia on July 11 and the reformulated Dubia on August 21 are **Walter Cardinal Brandmüller, Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke, Juan Cardinal Sandoval Íñiguez, Robert Cardinal Sarah, and Joseph Cardinal Zen Ze-kun.**

The original five Dubia sent to Francis on July 10 are reproduced below, followed by the text of the cardinals’ August 21 letter to Francis in which they reformulated their Dubia.

July 10

1. Dubium about the claim that we should reinterpret Divine Revelation according to the cultural and anthropological changes in vogue.

After the statements of some Bishops, which have been neither corrected nor retracted, it is asked whether in the Church Divine

Revelation should be reinterpreted according to the cultural changes of our time and according to the new anthropological vision that these changes promote; or whether Divine Revelation is binding forever, immutable and therefore not to be contradicted, according to the dictum of the Second Vatican Council, that to God who reveals is due “the obedience of faith” (*Dei Verbum* 5); that what is revealed for the salvation of all must remain “in their entirety, throughout the ages” and alive, and be “transmitted to all generations” (7); and that the progress of understanding does not imply any change in the truth of things and words, because faith has been “handed on ... once and for all” (8), and the Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but teaches only what has been handed on (10).

2. Dubium about the claim that the widespread practice of the blessing of same-sex unions would be in accord with Revelation and the Magisterium (CCC 2357).

According to Divine Revelation, confirmed in Sacred Scripture, which the Church “at the divine command with the help of the Holy Spirit, ... listens to devotedly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully ” (*Dei Verbum* 10): “In the beginning” God created man in his own image, male and female he created them and blessed them, that they might be fruitful (cf. *Gen.* 1, 27-28), whereby the Apostle Paul teaches that to deny sexual difference is the consequence of the denial of the Creator (*Rom* 1, 24-32). It is asked: Can the Church derogate from this “principle,” considering it, contrary to what *Veritatis Splendor* 103 taught, as a mere ideal, and accepting as a “possible good” objectively sinful situations, such as same-sex unions, without betraying revealed doctrine?

*3. Dubium about the assertion that synodality is a “constitutive element of the Church” (Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* 6), so that the Church would, by its very nature, be synodal.*

Given that the Synod of Bishops does not represent the College of Bishops but is merely a consultative organ of the Pope, since the Bishops, as witnesses of the faith, cannot delegate their confession of the truth, it is asked whether synodality can be the supreme regulative criterion of the permanent government of the Church without distorting her constitutive order willed by her Founder, whereby the supreme and full authority of the Church is exercised both by the Pope by virtue of his office and by the College of Bishops together with its head the Roman Pontiff (*Lumen Gentium* 22).

4. Dubium about pastors’ and theologians’ support for the theory that “the theology of the Church has changed” and therefore that priestly ordination can be conferred on women.

After the statements of some prelates, which have been neither corrected nor retracted, according to which, with Vatican II, the theology of the Church and the meaning of the Mass has changed, it is asked whether the dictum of the Second Vatican Council is still valid, that “[the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood] differ essentially and not only in degree” (*Lumen Gentium* 10) and that presbyters by virtue of the “sacred power of Order, that of offering sacrifice and forgiving sins” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* 2), act in the name and in the person of Christ the Mediator, through Whom the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is made perfect. It is furthermore asked whether the teaching of St. John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter

Ordinatio Sacerdotalis, which teaches as a truth to be definitively held the impossibility of conferring priestly ordination on women, is still valid, so that this teaching is no longer subject to change nor to the free discussion of pastors or theologians.

5 Dubium about the statement “forgiveness is a human right” and the Holy Father’s insistence on the duty to absolve everyone and always, so that repentance would not be a necessary condition for sacramental absolution.

It is asked whether the teaching of the Council of Trent, according to which the contrition of the penitent, which consists in detesting the sin committed with the intention of sinning no more (Session XIV, Chapter IV: DH 1676), is necessary for the validity of sacramental confession, is still in force, so that the priest must postpone absolution when it is clear that this condition is not fulfilled.

August 21

Most Holy Father,

We are very grateful for the answers which You have kindly wished to offer us. We would first like to clarify that, if we have asked You these questions, it is not out of fear of dialogue with the people of our time, nor of the questions they could ask us about the Gospel of Christ. In fact, we, like Your Holiness, are convinced that the Gospel brings fullness to human life and responds to our

every question.

The concern that moves us is another: we are concerned to see that there are pastors who doubt the ability of the Gospel to transform the hearts of men and end up proposing to them no longer sound doctrine but “teachings according to their own likings” (cf. 2 Tim 4, 3). We are also concerned that it be understood that God’s mercy does not consist in covering our sins, but is much greater, in that it enables us to respond to His love by keeping His commandments, that is, to convert and believe in the Gospel (cf. Mk 1, 15).

With the same sincerity with which You have answered us, we must add that Your answers have not resolved the doubts we had raised, but have, if anything, deepened them. We therefore feel obliged to re-propose, reformulating them, these questions to Your Holiness, who as the successor of Peter is charged by the Lord to confirm Your brethren in the faith. This is all the more urgent in view of the upcoming Synod, which many want to use to deny Catholic doctrine on the very issues which our *dubia* concern. We therefore re-propose our questions to You, so that they can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.”

1. Your Holiness insists that the Church can deepen its understanding of the deposit of faith. This is indeed what *Dei Verbum* 8 teaches and belongs to Catholic doctrine. Your response, however, does not capture our concern. Many Christians, including pastors and theologians, argue today that the cultural and anthropological changes of our time should push the Church to teach the opposite of what it has always taught. This concerns essential, not secondary, questions for our salvation, like the confession of faith, subjective conditions for access to the

sacraments, and observance of the moral law. So we want to **rephrase our *dubium*: is it possible for the Church today to teach doctrines contrary to those she has previously taught in matters of faith and morals, whether by the Pope *ex cathedra*, or in the definitions of an Ecumenical Council, or in the ordinary universal magisterium of the Bishops dispersed throughout the world (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 25)?**

2. Your Holiness has insisted on the fact that there can be no confusion between marriage and other types of unions of a sexual nature and that, therefore, any rite or sacramental blessing of same-sex couples, which would give rise to such confusion, should be avoided. Our concern, however, is a different one: we are concerned that the blessing of same-sex couples might create confusion in any case, not only in that it might make them seem analogous to marriage, but also in that homosexual acts would be presented practically as a good, or at least as the possible good that God asks of people in their journey toward Him. So let us **rephrase our *dubium*: Is it possible that in some circumstances a pastor could bless unions between homosexual persons, thus suggesting that homosexual behavior as such would not be contrary to God's law and the person's journey toward God? Linked to this *dubium* is the need to raise another: does the teaching upheld by the universal ordinary magisterium, that every sexual act outside of marriage, and in particular homosexual acts, constitutes an objectively grave sin against God's law, regardless of the circumstances in which it takes place and the intention with which it is carried out, continue to be valid?**

3. You have insisted that there is a synodal dimension to the Church, in that all, including the lay faithful, are called to participate and make their voices heard. Our difficulty, however, is another: today the future Synod on “synodality” is being presented as if, in communion with the Pope, it represents the Supreme Authority of the Church. However, **the Synod of Bishops is a consultative body of the Pope; it does not represent the College of Bishops and cannot settle the issues dealt with in it nor issue decrees on them, unless, in certain cases, the Roman Pontiff, whose duty it is to ratify the decisions of the Synod, has expressly granted it deliberative power** (cf. can. 343 C.I.C.). This is a decisive point inasmuch as not involving the College of Bishops in matters such as those that the next Synod intends to raise, which touch on the very constitution of the Church, would go precisely against the root of that synodality, which it claims to want to promote. Let us therefore **rephrase our *dubium*: will the Synod of Bishops to be held in Rome, and which includes only a chosen representation of pastors and faithful, exercise, in the doctrinal or pastoral matters on which it will be called to express itself, the Supreme Authority of the Church, which belongs exclusively to the Roman Pontiff and, *una cum capite suo*, to the College of Bishops (cf. can. 336 C.I.C.)?**

4. In Your reply Your Holiness made it clear that the decision of St. John Paul II in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* is to be held definitively, and rightly added that it is necessary to understand the priesthood, not in terms of power, but in terms of service, in order to understand correctly our Lord’s decision to reserve Holy Orders to men only. On the other hand, in the last point of Your response You added that the question can still be further explored. We are concerned that some may interpret this

statement to mean that the matter has not yet been decided in a definitive manner. In fact, St. John Paul II affirms in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* that this doctrine has been taught infallibly by the ordinary and universal magisterium, and therefore that it belongs to the deposit of faith. This was the response of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a *dubium* raised about the apostolic letter, and this response was approved by John Paul II himself. **We therefore must reformulate our *dubium*: could the Church in the future have the faculty to confer priestly ordination on women, thus contradicting that the exclusive reservation of this sacrament to baptized males belongs to the very substance of the Sacrament of Orders, which the Church cannot change?**

5. Finally, Your Holiness confirmed the teaching of the Council of Trent according to which the validity of sacramental absolution requires the sinner's repentance, which includes the resolve not to sin again. And You invited us not to doubt God's infinite mercy. We would like to reiterate that our question does not arise from doubting the greatness of God's mercy, but, on the contrary, it arises from our awareness that this mercy is so great that we are able to convert to Him, to confess our guilt, and to live as He has taught us. In turn, some might interpret Your answer as meaning that merely approaching confession is a sufficient condition for receiving absolution, inasmuch as it could implicitly include confession of sins and repentance. We would therefore like to **rephrase our *dubium*: Can a penitent who, while admitting a sin, refuses to make, in any way, the intention not to commit it again, validly receive sacramental absolution?**

Readers can find all three documents – the original Dubia, the reformulated Dubia, and the Notification to the Faithful regarding the Dubia – below.

[Dubia](#)

[Reformulated Dubia](#)

[Notification to the Faithful](#)