

EXCERPT FROM

CONVERSATION WITH CARDINAL SCHÖNBORN ABOUT AMORIS LAETITIA

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Having a conversation with Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, the Archbishop of Vienna, means creating a space for a reflection that demands tranquility and attentiveness. The lucidity of his reflection always goes hand in hand with a spiritual depth. In this sense, he corresponds to the charism of the Order of Preachers, which is well summed up in Aquinas' motto, *contemplata aliis tradere*, "to hand on to others the things that have been contemplated." And that is what our conversation was: a handing on and a sharing, not of abstractly intellectual or scholastic theses, but of reasonings that had found their verification in prayer. The tone and the rhythm of the conversation also respected this contemplative dimension.

Some have spoken of AL as a minor document, a personal opinion of the Pope (so to speak) without full magisterial value. What value does this Exhortation possess? Is it an act of the magisterium? This seems obvious, but it is good to specify it in these times, in order to prevent some voices from creating confusion among the faithful when they assert that this is not the case ...

It is obvious that this is an act of the magisterium: it is an Apostolic Exhortation. It is clear that the Pope is exercising here his role of pastor, of master and teacher of the faith, after having benefited from the consultation of the two Synods. I have no doubt that it must be said that this is a pontifical document of great quality, an authentic teaching of *sacra doctrina*, which leads us back to the contemporary relevance of the Word of God. I have read it many times, and each time I note the delicacy of its composition and an ever greater quantity of details that contain a rich teaching. There

is no lack of passages in the Exhortation that affirm their doctrinal value strongly and decisively. This can be recognized from the tone and the content of what is said, when we relate these to the intention of the text – for example, when the Pope writes: “I urgently ask ...”, “It is no longer possible to say ...”, “I have wanted to present to the entire Church ...”, and so on. AL is an act of the magisterium that makes the teaching of the Church present and relevant today. Just as we read the Council of Nicaea in the light of the Council of Constantinople, and Vatican I in the light of Vatican II, so now we must read the previous statements of the magisterium about the family in the light of the contribution made by AL. We are led in a living manner to draw a distinction between the continuity of the doctrinal principles and the discontinuity of perspectives or of historically conditioned expressions. This is the function that belongs to the living magisterium: to interpret authentically the Word of God, whether written or handed down.

Did some things surprise you? Did other things prompt reflection? Did you need to read some passages several times?

I was pleasantly surprised by the methodology. In this sphere of human realities, the Holy Father has fundamentally renewed the discourse of the Church – certainly along the lines of *Evangelii gaudium*, but also of *Gaudium et spes*, which presents doctrinal principles and reflections on human beings today that are in a continuous evolution. There is a profound openness to accept reality.

Would you say that this perspective, which is so open to reality and thus to fragility, can do damage to the strength of doctrine?

Absolutely not. The great daring of the Pope is precisely to demonstrate that this perspective, which is capable of appreciating and is permeated by benevolence and trust, does not do any damage whatsoever to the strength of doctrine. This perspective forms part of the vertical column of doctrine. Francis perceives doctrine as the “today” of the Word of God, the Word incarnate in history, and he communicates it while listening to the questions that arise en route. What he rejects is the perspective of a withdrawal to abstract pronouncements that are separated from the subject who lives and

who bears witness to the encounter with the Lord that changes one's life. The abstract doctrinarian perspective domesticates some pronouncements in order to impose their generalization on an elite, forgetting that when we close our eyes to our neighbor, we also become blind to God, as Benedict XVI said in *Deus caritas est*.

One is struck by the Pope's insistence in AL that no family is a perfect and ready-made reality. Why then do we have the tendency to be excessively idealistic when we speak about the relationship of a married couple? Is this perhaps a romantic idealism that risks falling into a form of Platonism?

The Bible itself presents family life, not as an abstract ideal, but as what the Holy Father calls a "work of craftsmanship." The eyes of the Good Shepherd look at persons, not at ideas that are present in order to justify, at a second move, the reality of our hope. Separating these notions from the world in which the Word becomes incarnate leads to the development of "a cold bureaucratic morality" (AL 312). We have sometimes spoken of marriage so abstractly that it loses all its attractiveness. The Pope speaks very clearly: no family is a perfect reality, since it is made up of sinners. The family is en route. I believe that this is the bedrock of the entire document. This way of looking at things has nothing to do with secularism, with Aristotelianism as opposed to Platonism. I believe, rather, that it is the biblical realism, the way of looking at human beings that scripture gives us.

As he listened to the synodal fathers, the Pope became aware of the fact that one can no longer speak of an abstract category of persons, nor encompass the praxis of integration in a rule that is completely general.

On the level of principles, the doctrine of marriage and the sacraments is clear. Pope Francis has newly expressed it with a great communicative clarity. On the level of discipline, the Pope takes account of the endless variety of concrete situations. He has affirmed that one should not expect a new general set of norms in the manner of canon law, which would be applicable to every case. On the level of praxis, in view of the difficult situations and the wounded families, the Holy Father has written that all that is possible is a new

encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of the specific cases. This must recognize that “since ‘the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases,’ the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same” (AL 300). He adds, very clearly and without ambiguity, that this discernment also concerns “sacramental discipline, since discernment can recognize that in a particular situation no grave fault exists” (AL, footnote 336). He also specifies that “individual conscience needs to be better incorporated into the Church’s praxis” (AL 303), especially in a “conversation with the priest, in the internal forum” (AL 300).

After this Exhortation, therefore, it is no longer meaningful to ask whether, in general, all divorced and remarried persons can or cannot receive the sacraments ...

The doctrine of faith and customs exist, the discipline based on the *sacra doctrina* and the life of the Church, and there also exists the praxis that is conditioned both personally and by the community. AL is located on this very concrete level of each person’s life. There is an evolution, clearly expressed by Pope Francis, in the Church’s perception of the elements that condition and that mitigate, elements that are specific to our own epoch. “The Church possesses a solid body of reflection concerning mitigating factors and situations. Hence it can no longer simply be said that those in any ‘irregular’ situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace. More is involved here than mere ignorance of the rule. A subject may know full well the rule, yet have great difficulty in understanding ‘its inherent values,’ or be in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to decide differently and act otherwise without further sin. As the Synod Fathers put it, ‘factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision’” (AL 301).

But this orientation was already contained in some way in the famous paragraph 84 of «Familiaris consortio», to which Francis has recourse several times, as when he writes: “Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations” (AL 79).

Saint John Paul II did indeed distinguish a variety of situations. He saw a difference between those who had tried sincerely to

salvage their first marriage and were abandoned unjustly, and those who had destroyed a canonically valid marriage through their grave fault. He then spoke of those who have entered a second marital union for the sake of the upbringing of their children and who sometimes are subjectively certain in their consciences that the first marriage, now irreparably destroyed, was never valid. Each one of these cases thus constitutes the object of a differentiated moral evaluation. There are very many different starting points in an ever deeper sharing in the life of the Church, to which everyone is called. John Paul II already presupposes implicitly that one cannot simply say that every situation of a divorced and remarried person is the equivalent of a life in mortal sin that is separated from the communion of love between Christ and the Church. Accordingly, he was opening the door to a broader understanding, by means of the discernment of the various situations that are not objectively identical, and thanks to the consideration of the internal forum.

I have the impression, therefore, that this stage is an evolution in the understanding of the doctrine...

The complexity of family situations, which goes far beyond what was customary in our Western societies even a few decades ago, has made it necessary to look in a more nuanced way at the complexity of these situations. To a greater degree than in the past, the objective situation of a person does not tell us everything about that person in relation to God and in relation to the Church. This evolution compels us urgently to rethink what we meant when we spoke of objective situations of sin. And this implicitly entails a homogeneous evolution in the understanding and in the expression of the doctrine. Francis has taken an important step by obliging us to clarify something that had remained implicit in *Familiaris consortio*, about the link between the objectivity of a situation of sin and the life of grace in relation to God and to his Church, and — as a logical consequence — about the concrete imputability of sin. Cardinal Ratzinger had explained in the 1990s that we no longer speak automatically of a situation of mortal sin in the case of new marital unions. I remember asking Cardinal Ratzinger in 1994, when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had published

its document about divorced and remarried persons: “Is it possible that the old praxis that was taken for granted, and that I knew before the Council, is still valid? This envisaged the possibility, in the internal forum with one’s confessor, of receiving the sacraments, provided that no scandal was given.” His reply was very clear, just like what Pope Francis affirms: there is no general norm that can cover all the particular cases. The general norm is very clear; and it is equally clear that it cannot cover all the cases exhaustively.

The Pope states that “in some cases,” when a person is in an objective situation of sin – but without being subjectively guilty, or without being totally guilty – it is possible to live in the grace of God, to love, and to grow in the life of grace and of charity, receiving for this purpose the help of the Church – including the sacraments, and even the eucharist – which “is not a reward for those who are perfect, but a generous medicine and a nourishment for those who are weak.” How can this affirmation be integrated into the classical doctrine of the Church? Is there a rupture here with what was affirmed in the past?

Bearing in mind the document’s perspective, I believe that a fundamental point in the elaboration of AL is that all of us – no matter in what abstract category we may be classified – are called to beg for mercy, to desire conversion: “I am not worthy to share your table ...” When Pope Francis speaks only in a footnote about the help given by the sacraments “in some instances” of irregular situations, he does so despite the fact that the problem – in itself, a very important problem – is formulated in the wrong way when it is hypostatized, and also despite the fact that some people want to deal with it by means of a general discourse rather than by means of the individual discernment of the body of Christ, to which each and every one of us is indebted. With great perspicacity, Pope Francis asks us to meditate on 1 Cor 11:17-34 (AL 186), which is the most important passage that speaks of eucharistic communion. This allows him to relocate the problem, and place it where Saint Paul places it. It is a subtle way of indicating a different hermeneutic in response to the recurrent questions. It is necessary to enter into the concrete dimension of life in order to “discern the body,” begging for mercy. It is possible that the one whose life is in accordance with the rules lacks discernment,

and eats his own judgment. It is possible, in certain cases, that the one who is in an objective situation of sin can receive the help of the sacraments. We come to the sacraments as beggars, like the tax collector at the back of the Temple who does not dare to lift his eyes. The Pope invites us not only to look at the external conditions (which have their own importance), but also to ask ourselves whether we have this thirst for a merciful pardon, so that we may respond better to the sanctifying dynamism of grace. One cannot pass from the general rule to “some cases” merely by looking at formal situations. It is therefore possible that, in some cases, one who is in an objective situation of sin can receive the help of the sacraments.

What does “in some cases” mean? Someone will ask: Why should we not get a kind of inventory to explain what this means ...?

Because otherwise, there is a risk of falling into an abstract casuistry. Even more seriously, we would risk creating – even by means of a norm that spoke of exceptions – a *right* to receive the eucharist in an objective situation of sin. I believe that the Pope is obligating us here, for the love of the truth, to discern the individual cases both in the internal forum and in the external forum.

Please explain this to me: Pope Francis speaks here of an “objective situation of sin.” Obviously, therefore, he is not referring to those who have received a declaration of the nullity of their first marriage and who have then married, nor to those who succeed in satisfying the requirement of living together “as brother and sister.” (Their situation may be irregular, but they are not in fact living in an objective situation of sin.) Accordingly, the Pope is referring here to those who do not succeed in realizing objectively our concept of marriage and in transforming their way of life in accordance with this requirement. Is this correct?

Yes, certainly! In his great experience of accompanying people spiritually, when the Holy Father speaks of “objective situations of sin,” he does not stop short at the kinds of cases that are specified in nr. 84 of *Familiaris consortio*. He refers in a broader way to “certain situations which do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage. Every effort should be made to encourage the

development of an enlightened conscience” while “recognizing the influence of concrete factors” (AL 303).

The conscience plays a fundamental role ...

Indeed: “conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one’s limits, while not yet fully the objective ideal” (AL 303).

«*Evangelii gaudium*», «*Amoris laetitia*»... *It seems that Pope Francis wants to insist strongly on the topic of joy. Why do you think this is? Do we need to speak about joy today? Are we at risk of losing it? Because mercy is disturbing? Because we are preoccupied with inclusion? What are the fears that the Pope’s words awaken in some people? Can you explain this to us?*

The appeal to mercy points us to the need to go out from our own selves to practice mercy and to obtain in return the mercy of the Father. The Church of *Evangelii gaudium* is the Church that goes out, and going out from oneself causes fear. We have to go out from our ready-made securities, so that we can let ourselves be reunited to Christ. Pope Francis takes us by the hand to point us in the right direction of testimony to the faith. He wants to show us an encounter that changes our life, an encounter of love that can take place only if we go towards the meeting with others. Pastoral conversion continuously seeks this presence of the God who is at work today. This presence kindles joy, the joy of love. Love is demanding; but there is no greater joy than love.