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Le radici della crisi che sta vivendo la Chiesa

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Pubblichiamo la relazione integrale di Douglas Farrow, Docente di Filosofia Cristiana alla McGill Univerity – Montreal (Canada), saggista, giornalista, dedicata alle radici morali, dottrinali, giurisdizionali e diaboliche della crisi che sta spaccando la Chiesa. "Non giudicate e non sarete giudicati", va bene ma quello che si dimentica è che così non si parla della santità senza la quale nessuno potrà vedere Dio".

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It is not too much to speak of a crisis in the Church today, a crisis in several dimensions. There is a crisis of morality. There is a crisis of doctrine. There is a crisis of authority. There is a crisis of unity. True, such crises are more common than some like to think. Perhaps the closest analog, however, comes from the sixteenth century. Half a millennium ago, the fathers of Trent had to defend the sacraments governing confession, communion, and conjugality from coordinated, if somewhat chaotic, attacks. The same three sacraments are threatened again today. They had to defend the Church's unity and authority against the Protestant principle – against the inevitably divisive claim that the meaning of holy scripture could be determined independently of tradition and without accountability before the entire Church. That too is necessary today. They had to weed out persistent abuses both in the sacramental life and in the governance of the Church, while striving to recover a unified vision of Christian existence in which justification and sanctification, freedom and obedience, hold together. This also is urgently required in our own time.

There are differences, of course. During the Reformation, the problem of justification put the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist under pressure, before overwhelming the sacraments generally and washing away, for many Protestants, the very idea that Christian marriage is a sacrament. Today the flow is in the other direction. There is great pressure on marriage, and this pressure is being felt by the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist, which are being asked to accommodate a changed view of marriage. But the problem of justification remains, as we shall see, a driving force and source of pressure.

Another difference can be found in the fact that the individualism of the nominalists, aided and abetted by the Protestant Reformation, has carried our whole civilization much further down the road towards a mythical utopia called Autonomy, governed (in Benedict's apt phrase) by the dictatorship of relativism. This utopia is in fact a deepening

abyss of strife between body and soul, between man and woman, between the human and the divine. Recently, the sexual revolution has created a moral landscape more like that of the first century than of the sixteenth, and even worse in some respects. For we belong now to a generation with few sexual scruples and with little love for children. Indeed, we belong to a generation fully absorbed in the contraceptive mentality; a generation engaged in an attempt to detach its sexual acts from procreation as far as possible; a generation losing, in consequence, the unitive function of sex along with the procreative. Ours is a generation which, for all its talk of global unity, is lacking the glue of a common humanity, deficient in inter-generational interests.

It is not surprising, in such a context, that the sacrament of marriage is under great pressure. A generation that approaches sex in this fashion, as *Humanae Vitae* predicted, is a generation that experiences alienation between the sexes, routine abortions, and growing dependency on increasingly authoritarian government. It is a generation in which the body is at best a play-thing of, and at worst a resented impediment to, the soul – or rather to the will, since we no longer believe in the soul. It is a generation in which marriage is becoming rarer, and in which roughly half of marriages end in divorce. It is a generation that does not look after others, and cannot even look after itself, except by trying to amass as much wealth as possible in support of its profligate habits.

Were it merely the case that the Church had to confront this in society at large, the task would be very much like that of the first century – a missionary task, a call to conversion, to a new vision of man, to a new mode of life, to a new discipline in support of a new hope. But not so; the situation is more complicated than that. For, in the West, all of this has entered the Church. It is inside as well as outside. It is celebrated in murals and liturgies. Hence there are those who think the Church has little choice but to change its own view of sex and of marriage and of the body itself. The problem is: It cannot do so without losing its own soul, without sacrificing its own identity as the body of Christ, as the people and society and kingdom of Christ. It cannot do so without denying the lordship of Christ. It cannot do so without rejecting the Lord and Giver of life. It cannot do so without the gravest disobedience to God the Father Almighty. What was said at Trent is true again today: There is an urgent need for "the rooting out of heresy and the reform of conduct." There is a need to recognize, as those fathers explicitly recognized, "that 'we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places'" (Eph. 6:12; Session 3). Yet Trent is behind us. Vatican I is behind us. All those fine passages produced by the fathers of Vatican II, they also are behind us. What then is ahead of us?

Another thing that is different today is the uncertainty that people inside the Church feel about the Pope's own approach to the crisis. Now, I am not among those who suppose that everything rests on the Pope; it did not do so then, and it does not do so now. Nor am I among those who can only be critical of the Pope, or of *Amoris Laetitia*. There is a real danger in that. How can we fail to show proper love for, and deference to, the successor of Peter, through whom God has moved people on every continent to begin (or begin again) to pay heed to the gospel of Christ, especially as it concerns the poor? How can we fail, without ourselves forfeiting both good sense and the joy of love, to acknowledge the many wise insights, incisive cultural critiques, and inspiring admonitions of *Amoris*? But I do share the concern of many around the world that the situation has evolved in such a way, not without some encouragement from the Pope, that the dubia – we might even say, the notorious dubia – were deemed necessary.

That, having been deemed necessary, they are necessarily in need of an answer , is clear enough; my concern here is not with process, however, but rather with substance. The substance, as I see it, is this: The Church is in crisis because it must once again face – inside itself, precisely as the Church – the question of its allegiance to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. For society at large it cannot decide. For the separated brethren it cannot decide. For itself it must decide, and give answer. And that answer ought to be voiced without hesitation by the successor of Peter.

So much for prolegomena. I would like now to say something further, and more theological, about the roots of the crisis. I said that the crisis is a crisis of morality, doctrine, authority, and unity. Permit me to speak briefly to each of these dimensions, calling on St Irenaeus (more specifically on *Adversus haereses* 3.24f.) for help.

The Moral Root: Justifying Sin

The moral root is always the deepest. Legend has it, and in the legend there is at least a parable, that the arch-heretic Marcion was excommunicated by his father, a bishop in Pontus, for sexual sin. Instead of repenting, this wealthy young shipping magnate sailed to Rome and founded a dissident network of competing religious communities, for which he was excommunicated permanently in AD 144. Marcion, as you know, taught that the God of Moses was a capricious, despotic deity; that the God and Father of Jesus was an altogether different God. To that extent he was a forerunner of the movement we call Gnosticism.

The Marcionite communities were morally rigorist rather than libertine, and were

eventually absorbed into the Manichaean religion. Perhaps that's the kind of repentance Marcion thought his father was looking for, but it came at quite a price – not only for his own soul, but for all who followed him. Everything that smacked of the Jewish religion, Christianity's own mother, he rebelled against. He tore up the emerging canon, excluding everything that Jesus himself had regarded as holy scripture and much of what the apostles wrote as well, preserving only ten letters of Paul and a truncated version of Luke's Gospel. In other words, he set covenant against covenant, scripture against scripture, community against community, and God against God. Rather than repent of his own sexual sin, he chose to remain outside the ark of salvation that is the Church of God.

Irenaeus – where today is our Irenaeus? – led the Christian bishops in providing a theological response to Marcionism, and he did not shy from fingering the real problem. The heretics, he said, "defraud themselves of life through their perverse opinions and infamous behaviour." The one is connected to the other; let us not deny it. Orthodoxy, of course, is no guarantee of good will or of good behaviour. Too well do we know that it can be a cover for all manner of deceit and wickedness! But heterodoxy actually lends itself to wickedness, though this too may be slow in revealing itself. Who are the men and women of real holiness in the Church today? Do they tell us that scripture may be set against scripture? Do they remind us that no one caught the words of Jesus about adultery with a tape-recorder? Do they invite us to rearrange tradition in a fashion more convenient to the mores of our age? Do they turn the principle of double effect into the principle of proportionalism, telling us that we may do evil if we think doing good will do more harm than good? Do they, for that matter, wink at contraception, turn a blind eye to abortion and euthanasia, or paint homoerotic pictures on the walls of their churches? Of what manner of life are such things the signs? I hear the voice, not only of St Irenaeus, but of St Basil, lamenting in his 90th letter: Our distresses are notorious, even though we leave them untold, for now their sound has gone out into all the world. The doctrines of the Fathers are despised; apostolic traditions are set at nought; the devices of innovators are in vogue in the churches; now men are rather contrivers of cunning systems than theologians; the wisdom of this world wins the highest prize and has rejected the glory of the cross; shepherds are banished, and in their places are introduced grievous wolves harrying the flock of Christ…

The Doctrinal Root: Opposing Justice and Mercy

Let us turn to the matter of "perverse opinions" and to the second root, the theological or doctrinal root. There is almost always a doctrinal problem attached to a persistent

moral problem, for it is a feature of fallen man that he projects his own disorder into the heavens, imagining strife in God as the real source of his own strife. Marcion and the Gnostic teachers spent a good deal of theological energy doing just that. Not surprisingly, what Irenaeus fixes upon here (he needed no help from Feuerbach or Freud) is the opposition set up by Marcion between those two great perfections of God, namely, his justice and his mercy. “That they might remove the rebuking and judicial power from the Father,” says Irenaeus, “reckoning that as unworthy of God, and thinking that they had found out a God without anger and merely kind or good, they have alleged that one God judges but that another saves” (Haer. 3.25). By thus dividing God, they unwittingly deny “the intelligence and justice of both deities,” putting an end to deity altogether: For, if the judicial one is not also good enough to bestow favours upon the deserving and to direct reproofs against those requiring them, he will appear neither a just nor a wise judge. On the other hand, the good God, if he is merely good and not one who tests those upon whom he shall send his goodness, will be beyond both goodness and justice; his goodness will seem imperfect, as not saving all who deserve it, if it be not accompanied with judgment.

Today our neo-Marcionites are more subtle. They do not speak of two gods, but they do speak of the one God as if he lacked judgment or could be known only by way of his mercy. They say they are serving this one God when they accompany non-judgmentally all who desire their accompaniment. “Judge not, that you be not judged” – here is a scripture, indeed a dominical saying, of which they are quite certain. Very good. But they forget to speak to those whom they accompany of the judgment of God, which is a very different matter than the judgment of mere men. They forget to speak to them of the holiness without which no one will see God. They think that to speak thus is intrusive, insensitive, rigid, or at all events unrealistic. Who would willingly listen to such a thing? Who wants to hear of the judgment of God? This means, of course, that a great deal of what Moses and the prophets said, of what Jesus and the apostles said, must simply be set aside; for in the dominical coinage judgment and mercy are two sides of the one gospel about the one God, who is always perfect in justice and in loving-kindness. It means, not that Jesus has displaced us as judge – the true judge taking the place of the false – but that there is no judgment at all. There is only negotiation; gradual, drawn out, endless negotiation. Under the “law of gradualness,” it seems, no final judgment need ever be reached by us and perhaps none will ever be reached by God either, as regards us. Not to put too fine a point on it, it means that justification is possible without sanctification; that Trent, therefore, has been undone.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the Church today is to lift its eyes from

earth to heaven; from “discernment of situations” to discernment of God; to recover its sense of the unity of God, the God who is all holy mercy and all merciful holiness, the God who does not need to attenuate justice for the sake of mercy or mercy for the sake of justice. St Irenaeus, ora pro nobis. St Anselm, ora pro nobis.

The Jurisdictional Root: Conscience v. Revelation

Now, to divide God, it is necessary to divide his revelation: not just scripture from scripture, but scripture from tradition. Tradition itself is regarded with suspicion as that which confines us in error rather than that which maintains us in the truth. So they do it violence. And their violence extends, as Cardinal Sarah (*The Catholic World Report*, 31 March 2017) recently observed, as far as the gospel itself. In his remarks to a colloquium on the tenth anniversary of Summorum Pontificum, he speaks of “a horrible, outrageous thing that seem[s] like the desire for … a complete break with the Church’s past” – as if “the apostolic Church and the Christian communities in the early centuries of Christianity understood nothing of the gospel,” as if the gospel has remained all but unrecognized until our own time, as if it were “only in our era that the plan of salvation brought by Jesus has been understood”!

He refers us, for example, to “the audacious, surprising statement” of Paul Joseph Schmitt, Bishop of Metz: The transformation of the [modern] world teaches and demands a change in the very concept of the salvation brought by Jesus Christ. This transformation reveals to us that the Church’s thinking about God’s plan was, before the present change, insufficiently evangelical… No era has been as capable as ours of understanding the evangelical ideal of fraternal life. (cited from Jean Madiran, *L’hérésie du XX siècle*, Paris 1968, 164ff.) “With a vision like that,” says Sarah, “it is not surprising that devastation, destruction and wars have followed … at the liturgical, doctrinal and moral level.” Indeed. And from whom were these habits learned? Who taught us to exercise a hermeneutic of suspicion about the past and to prize our present enlightenment? How did we learn to mark, not the time of Jesus Christ, but our own time as the fullness of times? I have already said in my books on the ascension most of what I want to say about the myth of progress, to which the Bishop of Metz obviously subscribed. I will add here, however, that by the 1960s that myth had deeply penetrated Catholicism, having found forceful expression fifty years earlier in Buonaiuti’s The Program of the Modernists (1907), whose handling of scripture and tradition is thoroughly Protestant in spirit even where it is Catholic in form. The outright rejection of Pascendi Dominici Gregis marks a turning point of sorts in Catholicism, after which it became at least conceivable that *Humanae Vitae* and *Veritatis Splendor* should also be

rejected, and that we should eventually be presented with a puzzle like Amoris Laetitia, which both is and (in a few spots) isn't obviously part of the Great Tradition.

No one drew it up quite like this, of course. The whole problem was meant to be solved at Vatican II. There the council fathers sought to incorporate what they could of Protestant insight into scripture and tradition, while recalling critical scholarship to the path of faith without loss of its enquiring spirit. So we have, for example, *Dei Verbum*, and *Dei Verbum* will not hear of any such change as the Bishop of Metz and his ilk demand. Nor will it hear of Marcionism, old or new. In His gracious goodness, God has seen to it that what He had revealed for the salvation of all nations would abide perpetually in its full integrity and be handed on to all generations… Holding fast to this deposit the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers…" (DV 7–10)

But we have not been holding fast to this deposit as one entire holy people united with their shepherds. On the contrary, among the shepherds themselves there has been, in far too many cases, a letting-go of the deposit, a departure from tradition, an embrace of the Marcionite "divide and conquer" principle that Modernism did its best to disguise. Scripture is indeed set against scripture, and tradition deprived of its integrity. Both are rejected where they prove inconvenient. The function of the magisterium is therefore in doubt. The new voice of authority is that of the conscience, to which revelation, as vouchsafed in scripture and tradition, is merely a guide and not a governor. This requires a word of explanation. Properly understood, conscience is a function of practical reason. It is the innate capacity and involuntary instinct to measure particular actions by the moral principles and knowledge of good and evil that are grasped by the intellect, whether through natural law or by instruction. Its primary role is to mark the divergence of actions, whether performed or proposed, from the good, insofar as the good is known to the agent. Conscience is ineffective to the degree that the good is not properly known, or to the degree that the agent has suppressed the instinct in question. Simply put, conscience belongs to the rational soul through its participation in the divine intellect, as that capacity "whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act" (Catechism 1778).

Which is to say, conscience is not itself a source, but only a voice, of moral authority. Its function is to point out to me that I am out of step with true moral authority, known to me through natural and divine law. Conscience therefore invites me – through conscience God himself, my maker, invites me – to a free, if sometimes costly,

conformity to natural and divine law. And it rightly and rationally accuses me if I do not conform. I say all of this, not to be pedantic, but to make clear that conscience can in no way assume jurisdiction over natural or divine law. Over civil law, yes; over natural or divine law, no. Now, what of ecclesial law? Ecclesial law, in its narrow sense as ius canonicum, is, to be sure, a form of civil or positive law, which must always be measured by natural and divine law, and therefore also by conscience. But that is not our present problem. Our present problem – and a major component of the current crisis – is that conscience is being misconstrued as a source of moral authority alongside natural and divine law: a source capable of overriding, not merely the ius canonicum and sacramental discipline, but dominical teaching and the lex credendi, on which such discipline is based.

Is this not what worries the authors of the dubia? After asking for clarification in the first dubium regarding a single type of situation – sexual relations that, because of Jesus' own words, have always been regarded as adulterous: are they adulterous or are they not? – the burden of the others comes to rest in the fifth, regarding the role of conscience in relation to scripture and tradition: After *Amoris Laetitia* (n. 303) does one still need to regard as valid the teaching of St. John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* n. 56, based on Sacred Scripture and on the Tradition of the Church, which excludes a creative interpretation of the role of conscience and emphasizes that conscience can never be authorized to legitimate exceptions to absolute moral norms that prohibit intrinsically evil acts by virtue of their object? *Amoris* §303 calls for "individual conscience … to be better incorporated into the Church's praxis in certain situations which do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage." It urges a certain negotiation between conscience and the moral norms of the Church, observing that "discernment is dynamic" and "must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized." *Veritatis Splendor* §56, on the other hand, already rules out such an approach, objecting to the opposition thus established between the teaching of the precept, which is valid in general, and the norm of the individual conscience, which would in fact make the final decision about what is good and what is evil. On this basis, an attempt is made to legitimize so-called "pastoral" solutions contrary to the teaching of the Magisterium, and to justify a "creative" hermeneutic according to which the moral conscience is in no way obliged, in every case, by a particular negative precept.

No one, it adds, can fail to see that such an approach poses "a challenge to the very identity of the moral conscience in relation to human freedom and God's law;" that it overturns the teaching that conscience derives its binding force from the fact that it

“does not command things on its own authority, but commands them as coming from God's authority, like a herald when he proclaims the edict of the king” (§58, quoting St Boniface). Well, apparently some can fail to see it, but no one can fail to see that there is a conflict. Hence the fifth dubium, which asks whether the earlier text remains binding. This is first of all a question about tradition: Can it contradict itself? If it can’t, then either one of the texts must be read in a manner contrary to its evident meaning or one of the texts must be judged not to carry the force of tradition.

Second, it is a question about conscience. Does conscience determine what is right, or does it merely discern what is established by God as right? Does conscience, in other words, command on its own authority or on the authority of another? If the former, then the first step in moral analysis is eliminated. One no longer has to consider whether a particular act (in this case an act of adultery) is intrinsically right or wrong, to be recognized as such by way of natural or divine law. One can bypass that and move straight on to questions about intention, circumstance, and consequences. In addressing these, the act can be rendered right without reference to its intrinsic character. The maxim that it is never licit to do evil that good may come – a maxim that distinguishes Catholic ethics from competing ethical systems, as St John Paul II emphasized – is set aside. But then the very notion of conscience disappears into a black hole of subjectivity. The lesson of Genesis 3 is lost to the subtleties and lies of the Serpent. (“Did God really say, ‘thou shalt,’ or ‘thou shalt not’?”) The fear of the LORD, it turns out, is not necessarily the beginning of wisdom.

There is a third, pastoral question as well: How do things stand in the internal forum and especially in the confessional? Where the conscience is excused from reckoning with the intrinsic nature of an act, and set directly to wrestling with the subjective and circumstantial and consequential dimensions of the act, the requisite contrition, penance, and absolution will be quite different. And this will have implications for the external forum also. What was once regarded as adultery, and hence as a disqualification for communion, will now be regarded as a new form of fidelity, and hence as a qualification. In which case, the Eucharist itself will be made witness to this fidelity that was once an infidelity.

I said earlier that the dubia, having been deemed necessary, are necessarily in need of an answer. But it is not so simple as that. Considered substantively, and not merely procedurally, the dubia are indeed necessary; but the fifth, at least, cannot be answered. Or rather, the only possible answer would be to withdraw the offending section of Amoris Laetitia and to correct or clarify the premises, appearing elsewhere, which

support that section.

The Diabolical Root: Dividing the Church

I come now to my conclusion, and to what I will call the diabolical root of our present crisis. The enemy of our souls is also, and a fortiori, the enemy of the Church of God. The devil seeks to divide man from God, woman from man, the steward of creation from creation itself, even from his body. He seeks above all to divide the Church. And division in the Church is what can be expected if we justify sin by insinuating opposition between the perfections of God; if we set scripture against scripture and tradition against tradition, and conscience against both. The truth about God is that he is never without either his justice or his mercy. “Neither does he show himself unmercifully just; for his goodness, no doubt, goes on before his judgment and takes precedency” (Haer. 3.25), the two working in wonderful harmony. The truth about scripture and tradition is that they cohere, and in their coherence they sustain the Church. There is, as Irenaeus says, “a well-grounded system that tends to man's salvation, namely, our faith: which, having been received from the Church, we do preserve, and which always, by the Spirit of God renewing its youth as if it were some precious deposit in an excellent vessel, causes the vessel itself to renew its youth also.”

The truth about conscience is that it has no jurisdiction whatsoever over the law of God. We are faced with a crisis in the Church today, a crisis much exacerbated (though not caused) by Amoris Laetitia, because that “well-grounded system” has begun to come apart, as it did in the sixteenth century. Where the Protestant reformers tried and failed to put it back together, the Council of Trent succeeded; but it can no longer be said, even in the Catholic Church, that “the preaching of the Church is everywhere consistent, and continues in a stable course” (Haer. 3.24). On the contrary, bishop vies with bishop, and it must in all honesty be said of Amoris that it appears to “think differently in regard to the same things at different times” (ibid.). As Cardinal Sarah himself remarks, our present crisis is made more acute by the fact that high-ranking prelates “refuse to face up to the Church’s work of self-destruction through the deliberate demolition of her doctrinal, liturgical, moral and pastoral foundations.”

I cannot claim here what Irenaeus claims at the conclusion of his third book, for it is impossible in so short a space even to list, much less to “expose and overthrow,” all those “impious doctrines” and falsehoods with which we are again confronted. But I can and will maintain this: If Marcion’s problem was fundamentally a moral problem, so is ours. I will go further, and say that its character is spiritual. It is not, in the last analysis, a question about pastoring people who have fallen into sexual sins and other relational

difficulties, as important as that is. It is not a question of being patient or charitable, either to those appeal to us for help or to those who beg to differ with us – “for our love, inasmuch as it is true, is salutary to them, if they will but receive it” (Haer. 3.25). And it is not a question, I hasten to add, of meeting this or that test of orthodoxy prescribed by the pride, or the insecurity, of über-traditionalists, who in their own fashion only perpetuate Marcionite errors. It is finally a question of allegiance to our Lord, a question of the fear of the LORD. Without a renewal of the fear of the LORD, it will not be resolved.

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