

CONVEGNO/LA RELAZIONE DI ANNA SILVAS

## Amoris Laetitia, ambiguità voluta

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*Pubblichiamo la relazione integrale di Anna Silvas, Senior Research Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities University of New England (Australia), dedicata alla rilettura, a mente fredda, di Amoris Laetitia. "La discussione su AL per molti è solo dovuto a cattiva interpretazione del testo. Ma il testo ha aperture evidenti". "Lo spirito hegeliano sembra aleggiare, ci troviamo in un contesto di liquidità di fondo. E' la prassi che è primaria".*

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'I saw the snares that the enemy spreads out all over the world, and I said, groaning: 'What can get through so many snares?' Then I heard a voice saying to me: 'Humility'. So said Abba Antony the Great, Father of Monks.

**And so also it seems to me**, in accepting to speak to you now, a year after Amoris Laetitia. Please forgive me, for it seems to me any number of more qualified lay faithful should be speaking ahead of me. The current field of the Church is so strewn with canonical, theological, and ecclesiological snares, one would hardly dare say anything, so strange is this hour in the Church.

**If I were to point to one issue the present crisis in the Church** is, it would be 'modernity', and that mood in the Church that so greatly prizes 'modernity' and follows it at all costs. Theologian Tracey Rowland points out that 'the modern' to which we were urged to update, was never defined in the documents of Vatican II, a truly extraordinary lacuna. She says: 'The absence of a theological examination of this cultural phenomenon called 'modernity' or 'the modern world' by Conciliar fathers in the years 1962-65 is perhaps one of the most striking features of the documents of the Second Vatican Council.'

**The Latin word moderna means the 'just now', the 'latest', the 'most recent.'**

The cult of modernity happens when we make this an overriding object of desire, so to gain the approval of the elite classes, the captains of the media and arbiters of culture. If I were to place the finger of diagnosis, it would be precisely on this emulous desire.

**Two years ago or so, a young friend of mine** who is a teacher and passionately committed in her Catholic faith, took a new job in a new Catholic School. One day some of her Year 8 students did a class exercise in 'politics'. Her students were in the second year of high-school, so they had been through eight years of Catholic schooling, and through the whole sacramental 'program'—horrible word that; what does its use signify?

She asked that if they were a candidate for an upcoming election, what would be their policies. To her surprise, every one of them, except for one boy, nominated same-sex marriage and the LGBT agenda. So she began to engage them in remedial conversation. That brought home to me how far the values of a purely secular modernity have more ascendancy among 'Catholics' today, than the values of the life in Christ and the teachings of the Church. Immersion in the practices of modernity has led to a de facto situation, that the mythos of modernity has seeped into the very bone-marrow and veins of Catholics. It permeates their way of thinking and acting implicitly. I look around, and I begin to wonder, with horror, how much this is now true of the leadership of the Church, perhaps even among the best of them. How many are deeply, deeply, more tributary to the modern world's 'program', than obedient to Christ's summons to our deepest mind and heart, really?

**Under St John-Paul II we seemed to have something** of a 'push-back' for a while, at least in some areas, especially his intense explication of the nuptial mystery of our first creation, in support of *Humanae Vitae*. This continued under Benedict XVI, with some attempt to address liturgical decay, and the moral 'filth' of clerical sexual abuse. We had hoped that some remediation at least was in train. Now, in the few short years of Pope Francis' pontificate, the stale and musty spirit of the seventies has resurged, bringing with it seven other demons. And if we were in any doubt about this before, *Amoris Laetitia* and its aftermath in the past year make it perfectly clear that this is our crisis. That this alien spirit appears to have finally swallowed up the See of Peter, dragging ever widening cohorts of compliant higher church leadership into its net, is its most dismaying, and indeed shocking aspect to many of us, the Catholic lay faithful. I look up at any number of higher prelates, bishops and theologians, and I cannot detect in them, by all that is holy, the least level of the *sensus fidelium*—and these are bearers of the Church's teaching office? Who would risk their immortal soul by trusting to their moral judgment in Confession?

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**In preparation for this paper, I thoughtfully re-read *Amoris Laetitia*** after nearly a year. As I waded into the murky waters of Chapter Eight, I was overwhelmingly confirmed in my reading of it last year. In fact it seemed to me a worse document than I thought it was, and I had thought it very bad.

**There is no need here to offer further detailed analyses**, carried out by so many thoughtful commentators in the intervening year, such as the early heroes Robert Spaeman and Roberto de Mattei, Bishop Schneider, the '45 Theologians', Finis and

Grisez, and many others, all of whom should appear on an roll-call of honour when the history of these times comes to be written.

**There is one group however, whose approach I find very strange:** the intentionally orthodox among higher prelates and theologians who treat the turmoil arising from *Amoris Laetitia* as a matter of ‘misinterpretations’. They will focus on the text alone, abstracted from any of the known antecedents in the words and acts of Pope Francis himself or its wider historical context. It is as if they interpose a chasm that cannot be crossed between the person of the Pope on the one hand, over whose signature this document was published, and the ‘text’ of the document on the other hand. With the Holy Father safely quarantined out of all consideration, they are free to address the problem, which they identify as ‘misuse’ of the text. They then express the pious plea that the Holy Father will ‘correct’ these errors.

**No doubt the perceived constraints of piety to the successor of Peter** account for these contorted manoeuvres. I know, I know! We have been facing down that conundrum for a year or longer. But to any sane and thoughtful reader, who, in the words of the 45 Theologian’s Censures, is ‘not trying to twist the words of the document in any direction, but ... take the natural or the immediate impression of the meaning of the words to be correct’, this smacks of a highly wrought artificiality.

**Pope Francis’ ‘intent’ in this text is perfectly recoverable** from the text itself, reading normally and naturally and without filters. Let us try some examples.

**The first of the Cardinals’ Five Dubia concludes:** ‘Can the expression “in certain cases” found in Note 351 of the exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* be applied to divorced persons who are in a new union and who continue to live more uxorio?’ Without doubt, a papal clarification of the intent in this footnote is of urgent importance to the Church. Nevertheless, what the Pope intended is clear from the beginning of this current section #301. His topic is ‘those living in “irregular situations”’. All that is said a few lines later about those in situations of objective sin growing in grace and charity and sanctification, maybe with the help of the sacraments, Holy Communion in particular, is posted under this heading of ‘irregular situations’.

**That those in supposedly ‘sanctifying’ ‘irregular situations’** who are admitted to the Eucharist include the divorced and civilly remarried who do not intend to abrogate their sexual relationship, is flagged in #298, where in footnote 329, a passage in G&S 51 which discusses the question of temporary continence within marriage, as taught by St Paul, is outrageously transposed to those not in a Christian marriage, i.e. in ‘irregular

situations', as an argument that they should not have to live as brother and sister. The intention, prefaced by a misrepresentation of St John Paul and a bare-faced lie about the meaning of G&S 51 is clear. So where is the difficulty in understanding what the Pope intends?

**In #299 Pope Francis asks us to discern** 'which of the various forms of exclusion currently practised in the liturgical, pastoral, educational and institutional framework, can be surmounted.' This indicates his aim clearly: how are we going to overcome those 'exclusions', liturgical first of all, practised till now? Where is the difficulty in grasping Pope Francis' intent?

**And there are many other instances like this.** As early as the preface he alerts us that 'everyone should feel challenged by Chapter Eight", and then late in that chapter (#308) admits obliquely that his approach may leave room for confusion. Let us believe him: this is his intent, which is not at all that difficult to grasp.

**We have noted the abstract focus** on the text alone that punctiliously excludes the acts and the person of Pope Francis from all consideration of the document's intent. Also strictly excluded as a means of ascertaining the Pope's mind, are the wider historical antecedents. To pick off a few in a galaxy of incidents, these include Archbishop Bergoglio's known practice in his archdiocese of tacitly admitting to Holy Communion all comers, the cohabiting, as well as the divorced and civilly remarried, his personal choice of Cardinal Kasper to deliver the opening address of the 2014 Synod, as if we are to politely turn a blind eye to the entire back-history of Kasper's activities on these issues, the various ways in which these two synods were massaged, such as the papal order that a proposition on communion for the divorced and remarried, voted down by the bishops in the 2014 synod, be included in the final relatio, his scathing condemnations of the Pharisees and other rigid persons in his concluding address at the conclusion of the 2015 Synod, and more recently, his warm praise of Bernard Häring, the doyen of dissenting moral theologians throughout the 1970s and 80s, whose 1989 book on admitting the divorced and civilly remarried to the Eucharist in imitation of the Eastern Orthodox oikonomia, was ammunition in Kasper's saddle bag. Then of course there was Pope Francis' endorsement of the Argentinian bishops 'interpretation' of AL, precisely in the way that he intended: 'No hay otras interpretaciones.' You know all these incidents, and many, many more, almost on a daily basis, in which it is not difficult to grasp Francis' intent at all.

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**Pope Francis, I am sure, is very well aware of the doctrine** of papal infallibility, knows how high are its provisos—and is astute enough never to trigger its mechanism. The unique prestige of the papacy in the Catholic Church, together with the practical affective papalism of many Catholics, however, are useful assets, and these he will exploit to the full. For to Francis, and we have to grasp this: infallibility doesn't matter, it doesn't matter at all, if he can continue to be the sort of change-agent in the Church he wants to be. That this is his spirit we learn in AL #3 where he says:

**'Since "time is greater than space"',** I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. Jn 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does.

**But I think 'the spirit' to which Francis so soothingly alludes,** has more to do with Hegel's Geist, than with the Holy Spirit of whom our blessed Lord speaks, the Spirit of Truth whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him (Jn14:17). The Hegelian Geist on the other hand, manifests itself in the midst of contradictions and oppositions, surmounting them in a new synthesis, without eliminating the polarities or reducing one to the other. This is the gnostic spirit of the cult of modernity.

**So Francis will pursue his agenda without papal infallibility,** and without fussing about magisterial pronouncements. He tells us so in the third paragraph of AL: Since "time is greater than space", I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium". We are in a world of dynamic fluidity here, of starting open-ended processes, of sowing seeds of desired change that will triumph over time. Other theorists—you have here in Italy, Gramscii and his manifesto of cultural Marxism—teach how to achieve revolution by stealth. So within the Church, Francis and his collaborators deal with the matter of doctrine, not by confronting theory head on, because if they did so they would be defeated, but by an incremental change of praxis, played to the siren song of plausible persuasions, until the praxis is sufficiently built up over time to a point of no return. Such underhand tactics are clearly playing to the tune of Hegelian dialectic. That this is Pope Francis's modus operandi, consider a certain 'behind the scenes incident' in the 2015 Synod, "If we speak explicitly about communion for the divorced and remarried,"

said Archbishop Forte, reporting a joke of Pope Francis, “you do not know what a terrible mess we will make. So we won’t speak plainly, (but) do it in a way that the premises are there, then I will draw out the conclusions.” “Typical of a Jesuit,” Abp Forte joked.

**Then slowly, region by region, bishops** around the world begin to ‘interpret’ AL to mean that the Church has now ‘developed’ her pastoral praxis to admit the divorced and civilly remarried to the Eucharist, setting aside the gravest of sacramental provisos that obtained up till now—provided of course that a sonorous note of ‘accompaniment’ is struck. And when Pope Francis sees this happening, what is his response? He rejoices to find that they have accurately picked up his cues in AL: I have already mentioned his famous ‘No hay otras interpretaciones’ to the Argentinian bishops; the latest is his letter of thanks to the bishops of Malta for their interpretations.

**I think it an injustice to blame these bishops for ‘misuse’ of AL.** No, they have drawn the conclusions patent to any thoughtful, unblinkered reader of this papal document. The blame however, and the tragedy for the Church lies in the intent embedded and articulated well enough in *Amoris Laetitia* itself, and in the naïve papalism on the part of bishops, that has so poor a purchase on the Church’s imperishable obedience of faith, that it cannot perceive when it is under most dangerous attack, even from that most lofty quarter.

**In this game of subterfuge** and incremental intent, the elaborate talk of painstaking ‘discernment’ and ‘accompaniment’ of difficult moral situations has a definite function—as a temporary blind for the ultimate goal. Have we not seen how the dark arts of the ‘hard case’ work in secular politicking, used to pivot the next tranche of social reengineering? So now in the politics of the Church. The final result will be precisely in accord with Archbishop Bergoglio’s tacit practice for years in Buenos Aires. Make no mistake, the end game is a more or less indifferent permission for any who present for Holy Communion. And so we attain the longed for haven of all-inclusiveness and ‘mercy’: the terminal trivialization of the Eucharist, of sin and repentance, of the sacrament of Matrimony, of any belief in objective and transcendent truth, the evisceration of language, and of any stance of compunction before the living God, the God of Holiness and Truth. If I may adapt here a saying of St Thomas Aquinas: Mercy without truth is the mother of dissolution.

**Pope Francis has absolutely no intention** of playing by anyone’s ‘rules’—least of all yours or mine or anyone else’s ‘rules’ for the papacy. You know well what he thinks of ‘rules’. He tell us so constantly. It is one of the milder disparagements in his familiar stock of insults. When I hear those who lecture us that Pope Francis is the voice of the

Holy Spirit in the Church today, I do not know whether to laugh at the naivety of it, or weep at the damage being done to immortal souls. I would say that yes, Francis is the agent of a spirit, namely the Hegelian Geist of 'modernity' very much at work in the Church. It is, as I said earlier, a stale and musty spirit, an old spirit that has no life in it, a privative force that only knows how to feed parasitically on what already is. I am not sure that Newman's Essay on the Development of Doctrine does not give us all we need to face the present crisis. In his seven 'notes' or criteria for discerning genuine development of doctrine from its corruption, Newman provides the needed response to the Hegelian praxis dialectically overwhelming theoria. The seventh note is "chronic vigour". Over time, a corruption shows itself to be exceedingly vigorous—but only at the beginning of the "infection", since it does not possess the life to sustain itself in the long term. It will run its course and die out. The Life of Grace, however, possesses in itself the Divine Life, and will therefore throw off in the course of time all that militates against it. Truth perdures. There will be moments of high drama, but, eventually, it must necessarily prevail. It is the way in which grace acts in the organic development of nature, the very reverse of the gnostic 'time is greater than space'.

**My dear fellow-believers in Christ Jesus our Lord,** this false spirit shall not, cannot ultimately prevail. In the 16th Century, the Protestant revolt demoted Marriage from a sacrament, and set in train the secularisation of marriage in the West. Constantinople began to lose its purchase on the accuracy of the Gospel of marriage with the Emperor Justinian and his Roman civil law of divorce. As the scandalous example of adulterous Emperors and Empresses remarried in the lifetime of their true spouses filtered down into the Church and became the custom, so a fair-seeming theology of oikonomia grew up to cloak this grave breach with holy Tradition. This is what Häring, Kasper and co, in their ignorant folly, have been invoking as an example for us to follow. Only till now did the Catholic Church in communion with Rome hold fast the Dominical and Apostolic teaching on the sacramentality and indissolubility of Christian marriage. I qualify that: you should study the recent history of the Coptic Church on this issue: it is most inspiring and encouraging. Let us take the Copts for our allies, in this and in other ways too.

**Is it still a possibility, the Cardinals' proposed fraternal correction of the Pope?**

We heard of this last November, and it surely lifted our beleaguered spirits. But now it is the end of April, and nothing has come of it. I cannot help but think of that passage from Shakespeare: There is a tide in the affairs of men..., and wonder if the tide has come and gone, and we the lay faithful are left stranded again.



**Yet Cardinal Burke has recently said:** “Until these questions are answered, there continues to spread a very harmful confusion in the Church, and one of the fundamental questions is in regards to the truth that there are some acts that are always and everywhere wrong, what we call intrinsically evil acts, and so, we cardinals, will continue to insist that we get a response to these honest questions.”

**Well, I hope so, dear Cardinals,** I hope so. We the faithful, beg you: forget about calculating prudent outcomes. Real prudence should tell you when it is the right time for courageous witness, whose other name is martyrdom.

**Pope Francis will not heed any fraternal correction,** as John XXII once did. But you know what? It would not matter much even if he did publish some statement along those lines. Let one 24 hour news-cycle go by, and we had better not count on it that further utterances do not subtly undercut or openly contradict what was said the day before. If we have not learnt that about his manner by now, then we truly are the stupidest of sheep—or shepherds, as the case may be. Pardon me if I venture to say this, but, however we account for it, the papacy is not working right now in the Church. Until we face this reality, unbelievable as it may seem, we are bound in intimidation and illusion, and the way out that the Lord would open up for us will be deferred. What kind of prophet do you want to show you the times? Hananiah or Jeremiah? Choose.

**What then is the plight of us the lay faithful** in these days of severe trial in the Church? I could hardly better the following comment, to an article by the honourable and courageous struggler, Steve Skojec, on 1P5. Pray for Steve and his family. The author of the comment is Roderick Halvorsen from Santa, Idaho. He came into the Catholic Church from Protestantism some years ago, and has no intention of leaving, but sees the follies of liberal Protestantism metastasizing in the Catholic Church. He speaks here of us, the lay faithful:

**But in reality, God is testing us.** He is asking us to be in relationship with HIM, yes, personally and intimately and truly. He has taken all the “crutches” of Catholicism away; the power, the glory, the world’s respect, trustworthy leaders and models, in short, all the stuff that can be of assistance to the faith, but is unnecessary to the faith, and like wealth and worldly success, can be the source of a weakening of our faith, when we begin to shift our trust to the “culture” of the faith, instead of to the person of our faith: Jesus Christ.

**Jesus answered, and said to him:** If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my

Father will love him, and we will come to him, and make our abode with him. (John 14:23). To this abode, this abiding, this being hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3), therefore, we must go.

**In the midst of social, cultural and ecclesial collapse**, it is a wonderful thing, but I see signs of a common cause between monasticism and the lay faithful who are seeking this interior abiding with Christ. Rod Dreher's the Benedict Option that appeared a few weeks ago, attests this movement. For not in efficient political programs, but 'below radar' so to speak, in the humble life of community ordered in Christ, monastic communities quietly established advance outposts of a new liturgical universe in the rubble of the western Roman empire. In other ways too, the lay faithful, and I have in mind especially the domestic churches of families, sense the worsening crises of these times, and intuit that for them the way of spiritual contest is in the local community, in the small, the hidden, the unimportant in this world's eyes. They have little or no role in the ecclesiastical world, or perhaps in worldly success either. Such seekers hunger for an alternative liturgy of life and community, prayer and work, and some of them are sensing that deep monasticism has a word for them. A dear friend in the John Paul II Institute in Melbourne, sadly soon to close, Conor Sweeney, likes to use the hobbits in Tolkien's mythology as an analogy for this hidden alternative Christian lifestyle. For it was the hobbits, an insignificant folk, who had no part in the counsels of the mighty, who against all odds had the decisive role in overturning the powerful forces of the dark Lord threatening to engulf the whole of Middle Earth in a reign of savagery.

**I have another friend, Michael Ryan, a married man and father**, whose shining light of inspiration among the saints is St Bruno. Imagine it, the witness of the most intentionally contemplative monastic life in the Western Church, the Carthusians, a beacon of hope to the lay faithful? For deep monasticism is all about moné, 'abode' or 'abiding' in Christ, about waiting and watching with hope-filled faith, as 'useful' as the Prophet Habbakuk standing upon his watch and stationing himself on the watchtower, as 'useful' as Simeon and Anna haunting the temple and waiting their life long for the dawning light of salvation and knowing him when he came, as 'useful' as the women who sat at a distance and watched at our Lord's tomb on the eve of the first Good Friday, as 'useful' as our all-holy Lady, Mary, taking her stand beside the Cross.

**Perhaps prayer, prayer of this sort**, is the most radically political act of all, and the very core of Christianity? Where O where have we Catholics been?

**Our Lord himself used to rise long before** dawn and watch in the night hours, even in the days of his busiest ministry. The disciples, awed one day by the mystery of his

prayer, felt a deep wistful attraction: Lord, teach us to pray. This is the one emulous desire that we do need: Jesus, the one model to whose imitation we can give ourselves completely, and we will not be betrayed. Can we, is it at all possible to learn something of the sentiments that filled his human mind and heart in those solitary hours of intimacy with his Father? Yes we can, for in his great compassion he shared them with us in a form of words: sacred words, holy words of complete trustworthy power and truth:

*Abba! Abbuna de b'ashmayo, yithqaddash shm'okh.*

*Our Father, who are in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name...*

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