

Vatican, Santa Marta, 11 July 2023

Most Eminent Cardinals

Walter BRANDMÜLLER

Raymond Leo BURKE

Dear brothers,

I write to you in reference to your letter of July 10th last. In it you wanted to bring to my attention some *dubia*, which, in your opinion, are related, in a certain degree, to the process put in motion in view of the upcoming Synod of Bishops on the theme of Synodality.

In this regard, I would like to share some very important aspects with you. With the upcoming synod, I have strongly wanted to implement a process that involves the participation of a truly significant part of all the people of God.

On this journey, with the help and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we have been able to gather *"the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the men of today, above all, of the poor and of all those who suffer"* and we have been able, once again, to experience that these joys, these hopes, these sorrows and anxieties *"are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts."* (*Gaudium et spes*, 1).

Precisely to respond fully to all that, in this process – that it is good to recall that will continue until October 2024 – questions and consultations on the structure (participation and communion) and mission of the Church in the time in which it befalls to us to live are also gathered.

With great sincerity, I tell you that it is not very good to be afraid of these question marks and questions. The Lord Jesus, who promised Peter and his successors indefectible assistance in the task of caring for the holy people of God, will help us, also thanks to this Synod, to keep ourselves always more in constant dialogue with the men and women of our time and in total fidelity to the Holy Gospel.

However, although it does not always seem prudent to me to respond to the questions addressed directly to me (because it would be impossible to answer them all), in this case I think it is suitable to do so because of the closeness of the Synod.

In particular:

Question 1

(a) The answer depends on the meaning you give to the word "reinterpret." If you mean "interpret better," the expression is valid. In this sense, the Second Vatican Council stated that it is necessary that the work of the exegetes – I add of the theologians – "may help the Church to form a *firmer* judgment" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 12).

(b) Therefore, while it is true that Divine Revelation is immutable and always binding, the Church must be humble and recognize that it never exhausts its unfathomable richness and needs to grow in its *understanding*.

(c) Consequently, she also matures in the understanding of what she herself has affirmed in her Magisterium.

(d) The cultural changes and the new challenges of history do not change Revelation, but they can stimulate us to explain better some aspects of its overflowing richness that always offers more.

(e) It is inevitable that this may lead to a better *expression* of some past statements of the Magisterium, and in fact it has so happened throughout history.

(f) On the other hand, it is certain that the Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but it is also true that both the texts of Scripture and the testimonies of Tradition need an interpretation that allows their perennial substance to be distinguished from cultural influences. It is evident, for example, in biblical texts (such as Ex 21, 20-21) and in some magisterial interventions that tolerated slavery (cf. Nicholas V, Bull *Dum Diversas*, 1452). This is not a minor issue, given its intimate connection with the perennial truth of the inalienable dignity of the human person. These texts need an interpretation. The same holds for some New Testament considerations about women (1 Cor 11, 3-10; 1 Tim 2, 11-14) and for other texts of Scripture and testimonies of Tradition that cannot be materially repeated today.

(g) It is important to emphasize that what cannot change is what has been revealed "for the *salvation of all peoples*" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 7). Therefore the Church must constantly discern between that which is essential for salvation and that which is secondary or less directly related to this goal. In this regard, I would like to recall what St. Thomas Aquinas said: "the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects" (*Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 94, art. 4).

h) Finally, a single formulation of a truth will never be properly understood if it stands alone, *isolated* from the rich and harmonious context of the whole of Revelation. The "hierarchy of truths" also implies placing each one of them in proper connection with the more central truths and with the totality of Church teaching. This ultimately can lead to different ways of expounding the same doctrine, although "[f]or those who long for a monolithic body of doctrine guarded by all and leaving no room for nuance, this might appear as undesirable and leading to confusion. But in fact such variety serves to bring out and develop different facets of the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel." (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 40). Each theological line has its risks, but also its opportunities.

Question 2

(a) The Church has a very clear conception of marriage: an exclusive, stable, and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation of children. She calls "marriage" only such a union. Other forms of union do so only "in a partial and analogous way" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 292), which is why they cannot be called "marriage" in the strict sense.

b) It is not just a matter of names, but the reality we call marriage has a unique essential constitution that requires an exclusive name, not applicable to other realities. It is certainly much more than a mere "ideal."

(c) This is why the Church avoids any kind of rite or sacramental that could contradict this conviction and imply that something which is not marriage is recognized as marriage.

d) In dealing with persons, however, we must not lose the pastoral charity that must permeate all our decisions and attitudes. The defense of the objective truth is not the only expression of this charity which is also made of kindness, patience, understanding, tenderness, and encouragement. Therefore, we cannot make ourselves into judges who only deny, reject, exclude.

(e) Pastoral prudence must therefore properly discern whether there are forms of blessing, requested by one or more people, that do not convey a misconception of marriage. Because, when a blessing is requested, it is a request for help from God, a plea to be able to live better, a trust in a Father who can help us to live better.

f) On the other hand, even if there are situations that from an objective point of view are not morally acceptable, the same pastoral charity demands that we do not treat as no more than "sinners" other persons whose guilt or responsibility can be mitigated by various factors that influence subjective imputability (cf. St. John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 17).

g) Decisions that may be part of pastoral prudence in certain circumstances need not be transformed into a norm. In other words, it is not appropriate for a diocese, a Conference of Bishops, or any other ecclesial structure to authorize constantly and officially procedures or rules for every type of affair, since everything that "is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule" since this "would ... lead to an intolerable casuistry" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 304). Canon Law should not and cannot cover everything, nor can Conferences of Bishops pretend to do so with their various documents and protocols, because the life of the Church runs through many channels besides the normative ones.

Question 3

(a) As you well recognize that the supreme and full authority of the Church is exercised either by the Pope in virtue of his office or by the college of bishops together with its head, the Roman Pontiff (cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium*, 22), nevertheless, with these *dubia*, you yourselves manifest your need to participate, to give freely your opinion and to collaborate, and thus claim some form of "synodality" in the exercise of my ministry.

b) The Church is a "mystery of missionary communion," but this communion is not only affective or ethereal, but necessarily implies real participation: that not only the hierarchy, but all the *People of God*, in different ways and at different levels, can make their voices heard and feel part of the Church's journey. In this sense we can indeed say that synodality, as a style and dynamism, is an essential dimension of the life of the Church. On this point, St. John Paul II said very beautiful things in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*.

c) It is quite another thing to sacralize or impose a particular synodal methodology that one group likes, to make it the norm and the obligatory channel for all, because this would only lead to "freezing" the synodal path, ignoring the different characteristics of the various particular Churches and the varied richness of the universal Church.

Question 4

(a) "The common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood" "differ essentially" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 10). It is not a good idea to argue for a difference in degree that implies considering the common priesthood of the faithful as something of a "second category" or of lesser value ("a lower degree"). Both forms of priesthood mutually illuminate and support each other.

b) When St. John Paul II taught that the impossibility of conferring priestly ordination on women must be affirmed "in a definitive manner," he was in no way denigrating women and giving a supreme power to men. St. John Paul II also affirmed other things. For example, that when we speak of priestly power "we are in the area of *function*, not of *dignity* and *holiness*" (St. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 51). They are words we have not sufficiently grasped. He also clearly sustained that while the priest alone presides over the Eucharist, tasks "*do not favor the superiority of one over the other*" (St. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, note 190; cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Inter Insigniores*, V). He equally stated that while the priestly function is "hierarchical," it is not to be understood as a form of domination, but "is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ's members." (St. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 27). If this is not understood and the practical consequences of these distinctions are not drawn, it will be difficult to accept that the priesthood is reserved only to men, and we will not be able to recognize the rights of women or the need for them to participate, in various ways, in the leadership of the Church.

(c) On the other hand, to be rigorous, we should recognize that a clear and authoritative doctrine on the exact nature of a "definitive statement" has not yet been fully developed. It is not a dogmatic definition and yet it must be complied with by all. No one can publicly contradict it and nevertheless it can be the object of study, as in the case of the validity of ordinations in the Anglican Communion.

Question 5

a) Repentance is necessary for the validity of sacramental absolution and implies the intention not to sin. But there is no mathematics here, and once again I must remind you that the confessional is not a customs house. We are not masters, but humble stewards of the Sacraments that nourish the faithful, for these gifts of the Lord, rather than relics to be guarded, are aids of the Holy Spirit for the life of persons.

(b) There are many ways of expressing repentance. Often, in people with a very wounded self-esteem, to declare themselves guilty is a cruel torture, but the very fact of approaching confession is a symbolic expression of repentance and of the search of divine help.

c) I would also like to recall that "[a]t times we find it hard to make room for God's unconditional love in our pastoral activity" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 311), but we must learn to do so. Following St. John Paul II, I argue that we should not demand of the faithful too precise and certain purposes of amendment, which eventually end up being abstract or even egomaniacal, but also even the predictability of a new fall "does not compromise the authenticity of the intention" (St. John Paul II, *Letter to Cardinal William W. Baum and Participants in the Annual Course of the Apostolic Penitentiary*, March 22, 1996, 5).

(d) Finally, it should be clear that all the conditions usually attached to confession are generally not applicable when the person finds himself in a situation of agony or with his mental and psychic capacities very limited.

Dear brothers,

I believe these answers will be able to satisfy your questions.

Do not forget to pray for me. I do so for you.

Fraternally,

Francis