

## Ambiguities in Pope Francis's Message of Mercy

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### Abstract

This essay purports to discuss some of Pope Francis's ambiguities. It is divided into seven sections. I present his background. I acknowledge the significance of his message of mercy and, based on Bernard Lonergan and Ladislav Štárek, I show how mercy ought to be wisely practised. I discuss Francis's Bergsonian epistemology, which I deem inadequate. I deplore his ambiguities about uncertainty. I then proceed to detail two impasses, which he has not overcome, at least until now: the possibility of ordaining women to the priesthood and the possibility of admitting Gays and Lesbians to eucharistic communion. I finally conclude with an appeal to a constructive and critical dialogue.

### Keywords

Bergson, dialogue, Gays, Lonergan, mercy, women's ordination

In a retreat preached at St John's Seminary, Boston, Cardinal Seán O'Malley noted, apropos the future Pope Francis, 'Fr. Bergoglio, when appointed bishop, chose the phrase *miserando atque eligendo* ('having mercy and calling me') from the homily of the Venerable Bede on the Feast of St Matthew, the publican converted and called to be an apostle'.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I will draw attention to ambiguities in Pope Francis's teaching.<sup>2</sup> Of course he is not ambiguous about the core of the Gospel.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Seán O'Malley, 'St Ignatius, St Francis, and Pope Francis: Lenten Reflection for St John Seminary Faculty', *Nova et Vetera* (English) 14 (2016): 727–34, at 727.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Mickens, a former student at the Gregorian University, now Editor in Chief of *La Croix International*, also noted Pope Francis's ambiguities; he titled the edition of 13 December 2020, 'Letter from Rome: Pope Francis is somewhat of an enigma'. More recently, in *The New York Times* of 28 June 2021, Jason Horowitz reported on the pope's 'mixed messages' about the rights of LGBTQ people.

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis's foundation in the Gospel is evident if we examine the 'Contents' of a book titled *Go Forth: Toward a Community of Missionary Disciples*, selected with commentary by William P. Gregory (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019).

In particular I am delighted with his strong invitation to mercy, which we all need to hear. On the other hand, his equally strong accent, especially in his interviews and in his *unwritten* messages, on the usefulness of uncertainty in the Church, presumably for the sake of renewal and dialogue, may be misleading and consequently may impede a correct understanding of his goals as the most influential pastor in our world. However, my comments are not meant to obliterate the relevancy and the arresting character of his encyclical letters, apostolic exhortations, and other *written* messages.<sup>4</sup>

### Pope Francis's Background

In order to understand Jorge Mario Bergoglio's spiritual roots, it is important to note that he came from a humble Argentinian family of Italian descent. Very early in his life, his grandmother Rosa shared with him her appreciation of the social doctrine of the Church and of Catholic Action. Having joined the Society of Jesus, he absorbed its spirituality and became aware of the all-importance of solidarity with 'the people' (*el pueblo*). Later, as Provincial in Argentina from 1973 until 1979, he promoted Jesuit presence among poverty-stricken areas and remote rural areas of that country.

When, in 1992, he was made a bishop, he opposed both Marxism and neoliberalism; so he was neither a left-winger nor a right-winger, and he had to endure opposition both from politicians and from clerics.<sup>5</sup> His sympathies always went to ordinary people, with their problems and miseries. Hence his extraordinary concern for mercy.

### Pope Francis's Insistence on Mercy

As we know, the late Middle Ages was a time of acute sense of guilt.<sup>6</sup> Since that time, the faithful, even into the early twenty-first century,

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed description of Pope Francis's encyclical letters and apostolic exhortations, for citations from some of his interviews, and for a comparison between him and Lonergan, see my article 'À la rencontre de deux penseurs jésuites, le pape François et Bernard Lonergan', *Cahiers de Spiritualité Ignatienne*, nos. 155–156 (mai-décembre 2019): 145–60. An expanded version can be found in chapter 14 of the Italian translation of one of my books, titled *La fede in dialogo*, trans. Erica Simone et Graziano Biraghi (Roma: Edizioni Ecogeses, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> See Gerard Whelan, *A Discerning Church: Pope Francis, Lonergan, and a Theological Method for the Future* (New York: Paulist Press, 2019), 108–25. I strongly recommend this well-informed narrative of Jorge Bergoglio's pastoral views, situated within the overall development of Church thinking. On Pope Francis's thinking, see also Whelan, 'Lonergan's Anthropology Revisited. During the Pontificate of Pope Francis', which is the conclusion of *Lonergan's Anthropology Revisited: The next fifty years of Vatican II*, ed. Gerard Whelan (Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2015), 501–11.

<sup>6</sup> See Jean Delumeau, *Le péché et la peur: La culpabilisation en Occident (XIII<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Paris: Fayard, 1983).

have greatly suffered from a judgmental view regarding sin and the conditioned character of forgiveness. For instance, the sacrament of confession used to be dubbed 'the tribunal of penance', and the priest, with his duty to ascertain very accurately the gravity of the sins that were confessed, was seen more like a judge than like a representative of the loving and compassionate Christ. This view has been variously dubbed 'rigorism' (the rigour of the law) or 'Jansenism', which was a type of rigorism.<sup>7</sup>

The distinguished canonist, Ladislav Örsy, correctly argues that this inflexible attitude has been buttressed, in the twentieth century, by a conceptualist, and most of the time literalist, application of Canon Law. Rejecting this kind of application, Örsy promotes a Lonerganian construal of intentionality according to which people proceed in dialogue through attentiveness to concrete situations, acts of understanding, judgments of fact and of value, and thus achieve good, practical decisions.<sup>8</sup>

In the same vein as the Jesuit Örsy, Pope Francis is very good on discernment – a practice he learned as a disciple of Ignatius of Loyola, called the *Spiritual Exercises*. This practice involves insights into various ways in which doctrine ought to be applied to the lives of sinners – all of us – who wish to be converted and yet sometimes feel incapable to implement right away *all* the components of conversion. He clearly sees how discouraging it is for Christians involved in irregular situations to be required by priests to completely change instantly. So, in chapter 4 of *Evangelii Gaudium* and in chapter 2 of *Amoris Laetitia* he begins with facts of life and he takes account of their complexities. Thus, in no. 199 of the latter, he writes: 'The dialogue that took place during the Synod [of the Amazonian region] raised the need for new pastoral methods.... Different communities will have to devise more practical and effective initiatives that respect both the Church's teaching and local problems and needs'.

We notice the pope's emphasis on mercy everywhere in his writings, speeches, and interviews. Just to give an instance: Talking about 'pastors and the lay faithful who accompany their brothers and sisters in faith or on a journey of openness to God', he states, 'Without detracting from the evangelical ideal, they need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively

<sup>7</sup> See Roy, *Embracing Desire*, trans. Robert Czerny with the assistance of Pierrot Lambert (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019), chap. 2, and 'A Diagnostic on Contemporary Religious Life', trans. Robert Czerny, *Spirituality* 26 (2020): 181–88.

<sup>8</sup> See Ladislav Örsy, 'Lonergan's Cognitional theory and Foundational Issues in Canon Law: Method, Philosophy and Law, Theology and Canon Law', *Studia Canonica* 13 (1979): 177–243. See also a summary, by Paolo Gherri, of Örsy's article, 'Theology and Canon Law in the Thought of Ladislav Örsy', in *Lonergan's Anthropology Revisited*, 459–63.

occur'.<sup>9</sup> He proposes a pastoral accompaniment that takes account of time and consequently proceeds step by step.<sup>10</sup>

Pope Francis's encyclicals and apostolic exhortations evidence a keen attention to present-day cultures. In doing so, he gives realistic grounds for the believers to cultivate hope. He also offers valuable counsels about discernment.<sup>11</sup>

### Pope Francis's Implicit Epistemology

In the wake of Duns Scotus,<sup>12</sup> Henri Bergson saw what he called 'intuition' as a direct apprehension of the concrete; by doing so, he offered a philosophy that he hoped would supplant the conceptualism of Kant as well as the materialism of the early-twentieth-century Sorbonne.<sup>13</sup> Bergson thus helped Jacques and Raïssa Maritain – and many others among his students – to overcome their positivistic view of knowledge. Nevertheless, the Maritains began to entertain doubts about his epistemology after having discovered the Catholic insistence on truths that can be conceptualized; they were ill at ease with his intuitionism even before they read the works of Thomas Aquinas.<sup>14</sup>

Regardless, we can detect, in Francis's unpremeditated responses to journalists' questions, something likely to trigger a boomerang phenomenon that challenges Catholic teaching on several issues.<sup>15</sup> Hence the question: Isn't Pope Francis's epistemology – which appears to be rather Bergsonian – far from being the best, with its confessed preference for the open-mindedness rather than the closed-mindedness,

<sup>9</sup> Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, chap. 8. However, nos. 300–65, especially no. 305, including footnote 351, of *Amoris Laetitia*, gave rise to queries (*dubia*) on the part of four cardinals whose construal of Christian ethics is entirely indebted to the inadequate use of Canon Law that Örsy exposed.

<sup>11</sup> See Gordon A. Rixon, 'Dwelling on the Way: Pope Francis and Bernard Lonergan on Discernment', *Irish theological Quarterly* 84 (2019): 305–18, at 305–8.

<sup>12</sup> On Duns Scotus's conceptualist epistemology as contrasted with Thomas Aquinas's intellectualism, see Roy, 'Bernard Lonergan's Construal of Aquinas's Epistemology', *Method: Journal of Religious Studies*, New Series 8 (2017): 17–31.

<sup>13</sup> See Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950).

<sup>14</sup> See Maritain's 'Preface to the Second Edition of *La philosophie bergsonienne*', in Jacques Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison with J. Gordon Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), 11–60, esp. 16–21. The rest of Maritain's book demonstrates that despite its anti-intellectualism Bergson's view of intuition was not entirely mistaken.

<sup>15</sup> Instructively, in 'Beyond the Metaphor of Levels of Consciousness: Appropriation of Sublative Transformations' (*Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies*, new series, 9 [2018], 47–74), Mark D. Morelli, after showing that Lonergan was impressed by Bergson's 'données immédiates de la conscience', rightly remarks, 'Bergson's influence on Lonergan was not so deep as to include an appropriation of Bergson's vitalism and irrationalism' (52).

for the intuition of the particular rather than the conceptualization of the general, for the concrete rather than the abstract, for duration rather than spatial representation, for the dynamic rather than the static, etc.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, by dismissing his opponents' stance, especially in his interviews, the pope was in fact denouncing a conceptualist *caricature* of Catholic doctrine that privileges what is closed-minded, general, abstract, spatial, and static, in the Church's beliefs and rules. However, does this caricaturing help? How can a caricature play a positive role in dialogue, whether as disallowed by the pope or as defensively maintained by his antagonists and repeatedly bashed against the pope? The latter told the youth to '*hacer un lío*', a Spanish expression that means 'to make a mess'. Does this apparent delight in confusion help educated people to understand how they can move aptly from the particular (for instance, individual religious experience) to the general (for instance, conceptual doctrine), and back from the general to the particular? How is the Church going to overcome the deep divide between those who extol religious experience and those who extol conceptual doctrine?

### Pope Francis's Casual Remarks on Uncertainty

Pope Francis extols the advantage of uncertainty. So the conservatives justifiably ask whether a pope should not firmly guide and unmistakably enlighten instead of contributing to the confusion by downplaying theological assertions. Of course Francis should not endeavour to solve one-sidedly by himself all the pastoral problems; nonetheless, must we really think inappropriate the conservative people's query about a pope's lack of clarity in the present world? And does not his approval of uncertainty increase the radical pluralists' contentment in relativism?<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, how will this uncertainty – praised or deplored – impinge on the future of the Church after Francis?<sup>18</sup> Such confusion makes some observers of the Vatican foresee that the next pope will be more conservative than Francis and will drop some important components of Francis's reforming agenda.

<sup>16</sup> Such ideas were picked up by Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Mounier, and others in the 1950s and wielded an influence in the Catholic world, including the Argentina of Jorge Bergoglio.

<sup>17</sup> Among the youth, on the one hand those who do not participate in parish life either applaud or are indifferent to the pope's insistence on uncertainty; on the other hand those who believe in Catholic commonality have suffered from moral relativism in their families and societies, and therefore wish to be reassured about truth and values.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, in *The Next Pope: The Office of Peter and a Church in Mission* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020), George Weigel proposes a reversal of virtually all that Pope Francis has stood for.

Regrettably, by not explaining how doctrine and personal religious experience interact, Francis unwillingly evokes the specter of modernism (condemned by Pope Pius X in 1907) in the minds of those who want to be orthodox, and thus elicits a strong negative reaction on their part. Not taking account of Pope Francis's correct dismissal of a *rigid* application of doctrine, they rise up to the defence of doctrine, interpreting it according to their classicist assumptions, unaware of the fact that their construal of doctrine is mistaken. As Bernard Lonergan often explained, classicism is a view that considers the amalgamation of Western culture and true religion as unsusceptible of significant change.<sup>19</sup> The problem is compounded by the lack of distinction between truth concerning doctrine and truth concerning morality, on the part of both the pope's fans and his despisers.

Both the diehard traditionalists and the diehard relativists misconstrue the dynamic and complementary character of the functions of meaning, namely the cognitive, the efficient, the constitutive, and the communicative functions.<sup>20</sup> For the Church to play its role in our multicultural world, we must never neglect any of those essential functions. Moreover, Lonergan's thinking allows us to go beyond traditionalism and relativism by offering a third epistemological alternative, termed 'perspectivism'.<sup>21</sup> Fortunately Pope Francis's idea of a unity in diversity through synodality is in line with Lonergan's position.

Unfortunately, however, in his homily at the Eucharist that launches the synodal process, the pope again denounced certainties: 'let us not remain barricaded in our certainties', he said.<sup>22</sup> Of course the context of his homily indicated that he meant *rigid* certainties, but in our relativistic world many people do interpret him as granting a license to dispense with dogma. In fact, Christians need communal convictions that include both certitudes and incertitudes. Whenever someone possesses grounded certitudes as foundations, that person can deal with the incertitudes stemming from doubts, questions, lacks of meanings or of values, and so forth.

Our following two sections will illustrate Pope Francis's lack of clarity.

<sup>19</sup> See Roy, *Engaging the Thought of Bernard Lonergan* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), Study 7, titled 'Neither Classicism nor Relativism', and 'Thomas Aquinas since Vatican II', *The Lonergan Review* 10 (2019): 107–26, sections titled 'A Basic Problem: Classicism versus Relativism' and 'The Classicist Notion of Culture'.

<sup>20</sup> See the four functions of meaning, in *Method in Theology*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 14, ed. Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 74–78.

<sup>21</sup> See *Method in Theology*, chap. 9, section titled 'Perspectivism'.

<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis, homily at the opening of the "synodal path" (10 October 2021).

### A First Impasse

The first issue that has reached an impasse goes back to Pope Paul VI's response, on 30 November 1975, to a letter by the Archbishop of Canterbury concerning the ordination of women to the priesthood. Paul VI then stated that 'the Catholic Church ... holds that it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood'. That pope also directed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (henceforth CDF) to expound the Catholic Church's teaching on this matter – which was done in the declaration *Inter Insigniores* of 15 October 1976. In addition, the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* of 22 May 1994 by Pope John Paul II asserted: 'I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful' (no. 4).

On 1 November 2016, Pope Francis, in response to a question asked by a journalist, reiterated the position held by three previous pontiffs. He said, 'On the ordination of women in the Catholic Church, the final word is clear, it was said by St John Paul II and this remains'. Some suspected, in his voice, an undertone of regret about the official position of the Catholic Church. In the meantime, on 29 May 2018, Cardinal Luis Ladaria, the Prefect of the CDF, reasserted that official position in the declaration 'In Response to Certain Doubts Regarding the Definitive Character of the Doctrine of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*'. In 2020, about a similar issue, Pope Francis was not even ready to allow the bishops of the Amazonian area to ordain married men to the priesthood, despite the fact that the Synod of the Amazon (6–27 October 2019) had asked for it and despite evidence that because of the lack of priests, many Catholics there had converted to Protestant denominations.<sup>23</sup>

Having attentively read those documents produced in Rome, I'll make bold to surmise that their chief defect amounts to an inadequate hermeneutics. The traditionalists (who are classicists) have read the New Testament in dependence on anachronistic categories such as 'ordination' and 'priesthood', which emerged much later in church history.<sup>24</sup> In fact, in the New Testament the evangelists do not speak of an ordination of priests (or of bishops) at the Last Supper. It is only after the resurrection that, in the early churches, priests (*presbyteroi*, better translated as 'elders') and *episcopoi* ('bishops', better translated

<sup>23</sup> See Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, (2020), especially nos. 89 and 90, in which the recognition of the need for every Catholic parish to celebrate the Eucharist is followed by a few words on priestly formation, the context of which presumes that only clerics – male celibates at present! – can preside at this sacrament.

<sup>24</sup> See Luca Castiglioni, *Filles et fils de Dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 2020).

as 'overseers') appeared, without semantic difference between them, as leaders of Christian communities.<sup>25</sup>

This handling of the matter in Roman Canon Law and theology presupposes that Jesus' choice of his first twelve disciples, all men, was an exercise of what was later called, in the Catholic Church, *ius divinum* ('divine right'). In other words, Christ Jesus, *as divine*, would have wanted his apostles to be men. Furthermore, he would have preordained that the elders who, after his death, became community leaders, would be men. Hence John Paul II's assertion, 'Christ's way of acting did not proceed from sociological or cultural motives peculiar to his time' and 'this call was made in accordance with God's eternal plan' (*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, no. 2). On the contrary, several biblical scholars have noted that the Jewish religious practices of Jesus' time did not permit women to preach and even to read in the synagogues, and that Jesus, namely Christ in his human knowledge, did not question those 'sociological or cultural' realities.<sup>26</sup>

The official position of the Roman Catholic Church contradicts much of contemporary exegesis and fails to take account of Christ's *kenosis* (self-emptying) that is celebrated in the hymn of Philippians 2:6–11. For me, this *kenosis* included, in the fact of 'being born in human likeness', namely in the Incarnation, a self-emptying that entailed definite limitations of his human knowledge. Consequently, Jesus' sending of *men* on unsafe Palestinian roads to proclaim the Good News in no way corresponds to an eternal divine decision. So the church standpoint on this subject amounts, not to the extraordinary (infallible) magisterium, but to the ordinary (fallible) magisterium.<sup>27</sup>

Let us remind ourselves that on the continent of Western Europe during the nineteenth century the Catholic Church lost the working class and the scientific community, that more recently it lost the youth, at least in postindustrial societies, and that it is losing, especially in North America, a great number of educated women, who are fully aware of the relevant questions raised by feminism. Thus Avery Dulles wrote:

If the exclusion of women from ordination is to be sustained, a justification must be given in terms of the biblical and liturgical symbolism and the needs of the Church as a sign of Christ in the world today. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in its Declaration of October 15, 1976, held that the reservation of priestly ordination to men corresponds to 'God's plan for his Church', but the rationale for this de-

<sup>25</sup> See Roy, 'Sacerdoce et prêtrise: Note sur le ministère presbytéral', *Science et Esprit* 73 (2021): 413–20.

<sup>26</sup> See Michel Gourgues, '*Ni homme ni femme*': *L'attitude du premier christianisme à l'égard de la femme: Évolutions et durcissements* (Paris: Cerf, and Montréal: Médiaspaul, 2013), esp. 39–43 (including the important note 44 of page 43).

<sup>27</sup> See Roy, *Revelation in a Pluralistic World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), chap. 6.



cision continues to be debated. It is important for the universal Church not to let itself become bound, even unconsciously, to the sociocultural conditions of a dying age.<sup>28</sup>

### A Second Impasse

The second issue that has reached an impasse has to do with gays and lesbians. Numerous Protestants and Catholics read a few verses (1:24–27) of the Letter to the Romans, again with a defective hermeneutics, interpreting them in a literalist, namely, fundamentalist, manner.<sup>29</sup> These people, including probably most Catholic bishops, do not know that Paul's utterly negative description of sexual practices between people of the same sex, far from being an invention by him, is borrowed from the contemporaneous Jews and Stoics.<sup>30</sup> In that Letter, the whole of chapters 1–3 simply serves as illustrating his basic point, a bold point indeed, which is that, in the face of God, the Jews were as guilty as the pagans: 'God shows no partiality. All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.... All, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin' (2:11–12 and 3:9). We therefore have to concentrate on Paul's basic point, instead of relying on an obsolete, very negative, view of homosexuality that appeared self-evident for some in the Roman Empire, in contrast to the earlier noble ideal of mutual friendship between men, which we find in Socrates and Plato and which did not necessarily include sexual exchange.

On 29 December 1975, the CDF issued a declaration titled 'On Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics', in which it asserted that homosexual actions are 'intrinsically disordered and able in no case to be approved of' (no. 8). On 1 October 1986, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Prefect of the CDF, released directives about pastoral care, on the part of the Church, titled 'On the Issue of Homosexuality'. It was an endeavour, not to change the principles presented in 1975, but to develop compassionate attitudes toward homosexuals. The importance of both the principles and the compassionate attitudes was subsequently underlined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* of 1994 (nos. 2357–59).

<sup>28</sup> Avery Dulles, 'Ius divinum as an Ecumenical Problem', *Theological Studies* 38 (1977): 681–708, at 705. As they cling to Pope John Paul II's presumably irrevocable decision, Pope Francis and his counsellors do not seem to be abreast both of the views of moderate contemporary exegetes and of the views of trustworthy theologians such as Dulles.

<sup>29</sup> On fundamentalism, see Roy, *Coherent Christianity: Toward an Articulate Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 94–95.

<sup>30</sup> See Alain Gignac, *L'épître aux Romains* (Paris: Cerf, 2014), 111 and 117–19.

On June 10, 2019, the Congregation for Catholic Education published a document titled “*Male and Female He Created Them*”: *Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education*, of course authored by a cardinal and an archbishop, that is, by two males apparently with no training in psychiatry. This document purports to foster dialogue and yet it ignores the concrete ways in which same-sex partners, at times with adopted children, live out their family relationships. It is based on the biological side of human nature, including the bodily difference between man and woman; it is also based on the presumed psychological complementarity between man and woman, and in particular on a pseudo-romantic view of ‘the values of femininity’, which men would not possess (nos. 17–18). No wonder, therefore, that this anthropology dovetails with the rejection of the ability, on the part of women, to exercise the pastoral role of priests.

On 21 October 2020, Pope Francis said to filmmaker Evgeny Afineevsky: ‘Homosexuals have a right to be a part of the family. They’re children of God and have a right to a family. Nobody should be thrown out or be made miserable because of it’. This statement is ambiguous: Does the pope mean the family that is the church, or a domestic family consisting of two husbands or two wives, and possibly with children? And can they be accepted for communion?

Paradoxically enough, on 22 February 2021, the pope approved a declaration titled ‘*Responsum* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a *dubium* regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex’.<sup>31</sup> Although the Declaration was not unsympathetic to such persons, it nonetheless forbade the blessing of their union; it was based on the same questionable construal of human nature that had been explicated, two years before, by the Congregation for Catholic Education.<sup>32</sup>

Practically speaking, the pope’s view *seems* to be that, first, since the homosexual tendency is irreversible, such people are entitled to enter into civil unions as long as those legal contracts are not called ‘marriages’, and, second, that they should be allowed to attend mass, with or without being permitted to receive communion.

<sup>31</sup> The *Responsum* ends with this note: ‘The Sovereign Pontiff Francis, at the Audience granted to the undersigned Secretary of this Congregation, was informed and gave his assent to the publication of the above-mentioned *Responsum*’.

<sup>32</sup> In an interview given on 24 March 2021, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, archbishop of Vienna, whom Pope Francis repeatedly said he trusted, regretted the CDF’s Declaration of 22 February. The cardinal offered a nuanced *pastoral* approach, stating that given the painful personal situation of many who have entered into a same-sex relationship, a priest should not deny a blessing to those who have expressed an *authentic desire to grow in faith and love*. He construed that blessing not as condoning every aspect of a same-sex relationship, but as a comfort granted by a priest on behalf of God and of the Church. In *this* case, wasn’t the cardinal closer to Pope Francis’s insistence on *mercy* and compassion than the pope himself, who had approved of the CDF’s *Responsum*?

As we can see, on both the issue of priesthood for women and the issue of same-sex relationships in the Church, Pope Francis's off-the-cuff comments are far from bringing clarifications.

## Conclusion

The present pope's innovations have to do with pastoral wisdom, not with doctrine. He is doing Lonergan's functional specialty termed 'Communications'. For those who understand his fundamental message, obviously he is perfectly orthodox.<sup>33</sup> However, a perspicacious church historian wrote to me in 2020: 'I think he sees more than he says, and says less than he thinks. The ambiguity is a studied one'. Notwithstanding Francis's orthodoxy, the consequence is that his 'studied ambiguity', as that church historian put it, is only hardening the traditionalists, who worry about doctrine, and confirming the relativists, who care little about doctrine. Nonetheless, we must make allowances for the fact that the pope cannot move forward quickly on all fronts.

Therefore, since in the West most people entirely relativize any religious doctrine, Catholics, along with some Protestant allies, must make a case for the precise way in which a non-caricatured doctrine, which is inevitably general, namely conceptual (not conceptualist), sheds light on particular religious experience, including the sacrament of reconciliation. The churches need this kind of contribution, provided it is done in dialogue with both people on the right and people on the left.<sup>34</sup> The practice of respectful dialogue requires that people take into consideration the concerns and questions of all who are preoccupied about Christian doctrine.<sup>35</sup> To achieve this goal, theologians must propose an

<sup>33</sup> For reflections on his dogmatic orthodoxy combined with moral-pastoral views, see Roy, 'In and out of Communion', *The Tablet* (7 April 2018): 13.

<sup>34</sup> We must be willing to learn even from those we disagree with. For instance, in the right-wing journal *The Wanderer* of 6 May 2021, I found instructive the exchange between conservative Archbishop Samuel Aquila and liberal Cardinal Blase Cupich about politicians who disagree with one aspect of church teaching, namely, American law about abortion. To my mind, the archbishop *rightly* invoked the distinction between *ex opere operato* (the objective effect of grace) and *ex opere operantis* (the communicant's subjective reception) of the body of Christ. However, Aquila accentuated the *ex opere operantis* in a rigid judgmental way. Although I could not find out what was Cupich's response, I am sure, on the basis of his previous interventions in favour of Pope Francis, that his pastoral policy is about the same as Ladislav Örsy's thought concerning the way canon law should be interpreted in practice (see my reference to Örsy's thought in my footnote 8).

<sup>35</sup> In this regard, I deplore the fact that Pope Francis was unwilling to talk with the four cardinals before they went public about their *dubia*, whose request I mentioned earlier in this article. Perhaps in the presence of Cardinal Walter Kasper, an excellent theologian and an expert in ecumenical dialogue, the pope might have been able, in a pastoral attitude, to attach importance to the cardinals' concerns and questions. See Roy, 'Principles of Fruitful

epistemology that underpins a vision of what it means to be a Christian in the twenty-first century.

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