"We cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth" (2 Cor. 13: 8)

A Prophetic Voice of Four Cardinals of the Holy Roman Catholic Church

A response from Bishop Athanasius Schneider

Out of "deep pastoral concern," four Cardinals of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, His Eminence Joachim Meisner, Archbishop emeritus of Cologne (Germany), His Eminence Carlo Caffarra, Archbishop emeritus of Bologna (Italy), His Eminence Raymond Leo Burke, Patron of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, and His Eminence Walter Brandmüller, President emeritus of the Pontifical Commission of Historical Sciences, have published on November 14, 2016, the text of five questions, called *dubia* (Latin for "doubts"), which previously on September 19, 2016, they sent to the Holy Father and to Cardinal Gerhard Müller, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, along with an accompanying letter. The Cardinals ask Pope Francis to clear up "grave disorientation and great confusion" concerning the interpretation and practical application, particularly of chapter VIII, of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* and its passages relating to admission of remarried divorcees to the sacraments and the Church's moral teaching.

In their statement entitled "Seeking Clarity: A Plea to Untie the Knots in Amoris Laetitia," the Cardinals say that to "many — bishops, priests, faithful — these paragraphs allude to or even explicitly teach a change in the discipline of the Church with respect to the divorced who are living in a new union." Speaking so, the Cardinals have merely stated real facts in the life of the Church. These facts are demonstrated by pastoral orientations on behalf of several dioceses and by public statements of some bishops and cardinals, who affirm that in some cases divorced and remarried Catholics can be admitted to Holy Communion even though they continue to use the rights reserved by Divine law to validly married spouses.

In publishing a plea for clarity in a matter that touches the truth and the sanctity simultaneously of the three sacraments of Marriage, Penance, and the Eucharist, the Four Cardinals only did their basic duty as bishops and cardinals, which consists in actively contributing so that the revelation transmitted through the Apostles might be guarded sacredly and might be faithfully interpreted. It was especially the Second Vatican Council that reminded all the members of the college of bishops as legitimate successors of the Apostles of their obligation, according to which "by Christ's institution and command they have to be solicitous for the whole Church, and that this solicitude, though it is not exercised by an act of jurisdiction, contributes greatly to the advantage of the universal

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Church. For it is the duty of all bishops to promote and to safeguard the unity of faith and the discipline common to the whole Church" (*Lumen gentium*, 23; cf. also *Christus Dominus*, 5-6).

In making a public appeal to the Pope, bishops and cardinals should be moved by genuine collegial affection for the Successor of Peter and the Vicar of Christ on earth, following the teaching of Vatican Council II (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 22);, in so doing they render "service to the primatial ministry" of the Pope (cf. *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, 13). The entire Church in our days has to reflect upon the fact that the Holy Spirit has not in vain inspired Saint Paul to write in the Letter to the Galatians about the incident of his public correction of Peter. One has to trust that Pope Francis will accept this public appeal of the Four Cardinals in the spirit of the Apostle Peter, when St Paul offered him a fraternal correction for the good of the whole Church. May the words of that great Doctor of the Church, St Thomas Aquinas, illuminate and comfort us all: "When there is a danger for the faith, subjects are required to reprove their prelates, even publicly. Since Paul, who was subject to Peter, out of the danger of scandal, publicly reproved him. And Augustine comments: "Peter himself gave an example to superiors by not disdaining to be corrected by his subjects when it occurred to them that he had departed from the right path" (*Summa theol*., II-II, 33, 4c).

Pope Francis often calls for an outspoken and fearless dialogue between all members of the Church in matters concerning the spiritual good of souls. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, the Pope speaks of a need for "open discussion of a number of doctrinal, moral, spiritual, and pastoral questions. The thinking of pastors and theologians, if faithful to the Church, honest, realistic and creative, will help us to achieve greater clarity" (n. 2). Furthermore, relationships at all levels within the Church must be free from a climate of fear and intimidation, as Pope Francis has requested in his various pronouncements.

In light of these pronouncements of Pope Francis and the principle of dialogue and acceptance of legitimate plurality of opinions, which was fostered by the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the unusually violent and intolerant reactions on behalf of some bishops and cardinals against the calm and circumspect plea of the Four Cardinals cause great astonishment. Among such intolerant reactions one could read affirmations such as, for instance: the four Cardinals are witless, naive, schismatic, heretical, and even comparable to the Arian heretics.

Such apodictic merciless judgments reveal not only intolerance, refusal of dialogue, and irrational rage, but demonstrate also a surrender to the impossibility of speaking the truth, a surrender to relativism in doctrine and practice, in faith and life. The above-mentioned clerical reaction against the prophetic voice of the Four Cardinals parades ultimately

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powerlessness before the eyes of the truth. Such a violent reaction has only one aim: to silence the voice of the truth, which is disturbing and annoying the apparently peaceful nebulous ambiguity of these clerical critics.

The negative reactions to the public statement of the Four Cardinals resemble the general doctrinal confusion of the Arian crisis in the fourth century. It is helpful to all to quote in the situation of the doctrinal confusion in our days some affirmations of Saint Hilary of Poitiers, the "Athanasius of the West".

> "You [the bishops of Gaul] who still remain with me faithful in Christ did not give way when threatened with the onset of heresy, and now by meeting that onset you have broken all its violence. Yes, brethren, you have conquered, to the abundant joy of those who share your faith: and your unimpaired constancy gained the double glory of keeping a pure conscience and giving an authoritative example" (Hil. *De Syn*., 3).

> "Your [the bishops of Gaul] invincible faith keeps the honourable distinction of conscious worth and, content with repudiating crafty, vague, or hesitating action, safely abides in Christ, preserving the profession of its liberty. For since we all suffered deep and grievous pain at the actions of the wicked against God, within our boundaries alone is communion in Christ to be found from the time that the Church began to be harried by disturbances such as the expatriation of bishops, the deposition of priests, the intimidation of the people, the threatening of the faith, and the determination of the meaning of Christ's doctrine by human will and power. Your resolute faith does not pretend to be ignorant of these facts or profess that it can tolerate them, perceiving that by the act of hypocritical assent it would bring itself before the bar of conscience" (Hil. *De Syn*., 4).

> "I have spoken what I myself believed, conscious that I owed it as my soldier's service to the Church to send to you in accordance with the teaching of the Gospel by these letters the voice of the office which I hold in Christ. It is yours to discuss, to provide and to act, that the inviolable fidelity in which you stand you

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> may still keep with conscientious hearts, and that you may continue to hold what you hold now" (Hil. *De Syn.*, 92).

The following words of Saint Basil the Great, addressed to the Latin Bishops, can be in some aspects applied to the situation of those who in our days ask for doctrinal clarity, including our Four Cardinals:

> "The one charge which is now sure to secure severe punishment is the careful keeping of the traditions of the Fathers. We are not being attacked for the sake of riches, or glory, or any temporal advantages. We stand in the arena to fight for our common heritage, for the treasure of the sound faith, derived from our Fathers. Grieve with us, all you who love the brethren, at the shutting of the mouths of our men of true religion, and at the opening of the bold and blasphemous lips of all that utter unrighteousness against God. The pillars and foundation of the truth are scattered abroad. We, whose insignificance has allowed of our being overlooked, are deprived of our right of free speech" (*Ep.* 243, 2.4).

Today those bishops and cardinals, who ask for clarity and who try to fulfill their duty in guarding sacredly and faithfully interpreting the transmitted Divine Revelation concerning the Sacraments of Marriage and the Eucharist, are no longer exiled as it was with the Nicene bishops during the Arian crisis. Contrary to the time of the Arian crisis, today, as wrote Rudolf Graber, the bishop of Ratisbone, in 1973, exile of the bishops is replaced by hush-up strategies and by slander campaigns (cf. *Athanasius und die Kirche unserer Zeit*, Abensberg 1973, p. 23).

Another champion of the Catholic faith during the Arian crisis was Saint Gregory Nazianzen. He wrote the following striking characterization of the behavior of the majority of the shepherds of the Church in those times. This voice of the great Doctor of the Church should be a salutary warning for the bishops of all times:

> "Surely the pastors have done foolishly; for, excepting a very few, who either on account of their insignificance were passed over, or who by reason of their virtue resisted, and who were to be left as a seed and root for the springing up again and revival of Israel by the influences of the Spirit, all temporized, only differing

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> from each other in this, that some succumbed earlier, and others later; some were foremost champions and leaders in the impiety, and others joined the second rank of the battle, being overcome by fear, or by interest, or by flattery, or, what was the most excusable, by their own ignorance" (*Orat*. 21, 24).

When Pope Liberius in 357 signed one of the so called formulas of Sirmium, in which he deliberately discarded the dogmatically defined expression "homo-ousios" and excommunicated Saint Athanasius in order to have peace and harmony with the Arian and Semi-Arian bishops of the East, faithful Catholics and some few bishops, especially Saint Hilary of Poitiers, were deeply shocked. Saint Hilary transmitted the letter that Pope Liberius wrote to the Oriental bishops, announcing the acceptance of the formula of Sirmium and the excommunication of Saint Athanasius. In his deep pain and dismay, Saint Hilary added to the letter in a kind of desperation the phrase:

> "Anathema tibi a me dictum, praevaricator Liberi" (I say to you anathema, prevaricator Liberius), cf. *Denzinger-Schönmetzer*, n. 141. Pope Liberius wanted to have peace and harmony at any price, even at the expense of the Divine truth. In his letter to the heterodox Latin bishops Ursace, Valence, and Germinius announcing to them the above-mentioned decisions, he wrote that he preferred peace and harmony to martyrdom (cf. cf. *Denzinger-Schönmetzer*, n. 142).

> "In what a dramatic contrast stood the behavior of Pope Liberius to the following conviction of Saint Hilary of Poitiers: "We don't make peace at the expense of the truth by making concessions in order to acquire the reputation of tolerance. We make peace by fighting legitimately according to the rules of the Holy Spirit. There is a danger to ally surreptitiously with unbelief under the beautiful name of peace." (Hil. *Ad Const.*, 2, 6, 2).

Blessed John Henry Newman commented on these unusual sad facts with the following wise and equilibrated affirmation:

> "While it is historically true, it is in no sense doctrinally false, that a Pope, as a private doctor, and much more Bishops, when not teaching formally, may err, as

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> we find they did err in the fourth century. Pope Liberius might sign a Eusebian formula at Sirmium, and the mass of Bishops at Ariminum or elsewhere, and yet they might, in spite of this error, be infallible in their *ex cathedra* decisions" (*The Arians of the Fourth Century*, London, 1876, p. 465).

The Four Cardinals with their prophetic voice demanding doctrinal and pastoral clarity have a great merit before their own conscience, before history, and before the innumerable simple faithful Catholics of our days, who are driven to the ecclesiastical periphery, because of their fidelity to Christ's teaching about the indissolubility of marriage. But above all, the Four Cardinals have a great merit in the eyes of Christ. Because of their courageous voice, their names will shine brightly at the Last Judgment. For they obeyed the voice of their conscience remembering the words of Saint Paul: "We cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth" (2 Cor 13: 8). Surely, at the Last Judgment the above-mentioned mostly clerical critics of the Four Cardinals will not have an easy answer for their violent attack on such a just, worthy, and meritorious act of these Four Members of the Sacred College of Cardinals.

The following words inspired by the Holy Spirit retain their prophetic value especially in view of the spreading doctrinal and practical confusion regarding the Sacrament of Marriage in our days:

> "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry" (2 Tim. 4: 3-5).

May all, who in our days still take seriously their baptismal vows and their priestly and episcopal promises, receive the strength and the grace of God so that they may reiterate together with Saint Hilary the words: "May I always be in exile, if only the truth begins to be preached again!" (*De Syn*., 78). This strength and grace we wish wholeheartedly to our Four Cardinals and as well as to those who criticize them.

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