



Pope Francis Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*

Address to the Dawson Society

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I am very pleased to be with you this evening and to have the chance to share some thoughts with you about the recent Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*.

When Tom Gourlay first approached me about addressing the Dawson Society tonight he suggested two topics I might like to consider. One was the topic I have ultimately chosen, *Amoris Laetitia*, and the other, which had a lot of attraction for me, was the literary work of J.R.R. Tolkien. Tempted as I was by this latter topic, and having just finished reading a book entitled "*A Hobbit, a Wardrobe and a Great War*" by Joseph Loconte which, as you will have realised, is a study of the influence of their war experience on the writings of both Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, I nevertheless realised that it would take more time than I had at my disposal to prepare something worthwhile and sufficiently well researched on what is a fascinating area of enquiry. Perhaps another time when there are other less pressing matters claiming my attention!

This is not to say that the topic I have chosen does not also require a great deal of research and reflection. However, as with most of the bishops in Australia I have been turning my attention to this document for some time I did not feel I was starting from scratch in putting something together to share with you this evening. However, right at the outset I need to say that I am not in a position to offer the last word on this subject and nor of course is anyone else. Formal papal documents, which are official acts of the papal magisterium, need to be read, and reflected on and spoken about, carefully, with openness and with a proper, mature reverence both for their subject matter and for the role their author plays in our community of faith. This evening then I want to offer some reflections and some suggestions concerning the nature and importance of this document for the life of our Church – or should I say, more accurately, for the life of the Lord's Church, for it is his Church before it is ours.

I want to begin by attempting to provide some context for *Amoris Laetitia*. This question of context is an important and a vast one: we could devote the whole evening's discussion to this matter alone. As many of you would know the present Archbishop of Brisbane, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, was prior to becoming a bishop a lecturer in Sacred Scripture at the Catholic Theological College in Melbourne. One of the things he used to insist on with his students, as they entered into the sometimes complex and murky world of scriptural interpretation, was the importance of this issue of context. To impress this upon them he used a phrase which is often now associated with his approach to the Sacred Scriptures: *text without context is pretext*. What he was suggesting, of course, is that it is only possible to understand a particular text in one of the gospels, or indeed one of the gospels themselves, if you are familiar with the context – and in the case of particular gospel texts that context would include the verses which immediately



preceded and followed the particular text you were studying, the wider context of the section of the gospel in which the text is found, the even wider context of the particular gospel as a whole, and the wider context again of the whole gospel and larger New Testament tradition, not to mention the cultural norms, religious traditions, linguistic patterns, and so on, in and through which Jesus operated. It is this complex question of context which helps us to grasp the significance of the saying that “even the devil can quote scripture” and does so to falsify the message of the gospel rather than to promote it. We might similarly say “even the devil can quote the Pope” and does so not to promote and clarify but rather to obscure the Pope’s message.

Context then is important and I want to make just two suggestions. The first is to clarify what I might call the “status” of the Pope’s Apostolic Exhortation. Let me do this by reminding us all of the obvious fact that not everything the Pope says is infallible. I do not say this to in any way suggest that *Amoris Laetitia* is not an authentic and authoritative expression of the Pope’s role and responsibility to “confirm the brothers in their faith” as John’s gospel puts it in relation to St Peter. One of the many things which is a gift to the Church but which can be used as a weapon against the communion of the Church is, surprisingly perhaps, the dogma of Papal Infallibility. Blessed John Henry Newman was aware of this. He believed totally in the infallibility of the Successor of Peter; he believed in the authority of an Ecumenical Council, in this case the First Vatican Council, to solemnly define papal infallibility as a dogma of the Church; but he was not convinced at the time that this was a wise thing for the Church to do. One of the reasons for his caution was his intuition that, once papal infallibility was defined, many people would be inclined to disregard anything the Pope said which was not expressed as an infallible statement. Put in simple terms the temptation was for people to ask if a particular teaching of the Pope was being taught infallibly and if the answer was “no” then for some, and perhaps many Catholics, this meant that you could simply dismiss or ignore what the Pope said. In other words, the only authoritative and therefore important and even binding teachings of the Pope were infallible ones.

It is helpful then to understand what constitutes an infallible teaching, whether *Amoris Laetitia* comes under the rubric of an infallible teaching, and if not what level of authority it does have in the Church.

This itself is a complex area and I am aware of the risk of trying to summarise in a few words what the Church’s understanding of this matter is, so let me alert you that what I say now needs to be fleshed out by a careful study of the long history of the development of the dogma of infallibility.

Fundamentally it is the Church, as the Body of Christ and the Universal Sacrament of Salvation, which is gifted with the charism of infallibility. In many ways, although it is a positive quality of the Church, it is best expressed in a negative proposition: that the Church, through a special and enduring gift of God, is preserved from error in her definitive dogmatic teachings regarding matters of faith and morals. What the Church says when this charism is invoked will not be false or in error. That does not mean that the truth is necessarily being expressed in the only, or the best, or the most complete way. An infallible teaching always “closes down” some areas of discussion or research, but it always opens many more.

Practically speaking there are three ways in which the Church’s charism of infallibility is exercised. The first is through a solemn and definitive teaching of an Ecumenical Council which is a council of the world’s bishops presided over by the Bishop of Rome, with whom all the bishops must be in communion and without whom they are unable to act as a College. It is the College of Bishops,



in communion with their head, the Bishop of Rome, and never without him, who can together exercise the charism of infallibility. In doing so it must be clear that this is the intention of the College. Not every word spoken at an Ecumenical Council, and not every decision made, is an exercise of the Church's infallibility. The College, with its head, must be very clear that they intend to exercise this charism, and they can only do so in relation to matters of faith and morals. The solemn definition of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council is an example of this exercise of infallibility.

The second way in which the Church's charism of infallibility can be exercised is through a teaching of the Bishop of Rome who intends to teach and makes it clear that he intends to enunciate a belief of the Church in relation to a matter of faith or morals, and to do so invoking the charism of infallibility. The solemn proclamation of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven taught by Pope Pius XII in 1950 is an example of this exercise of papal infallibility.

The third way is by means of what is called the Ordinary and Universal Magisterium of the bishops. This refers to a teaching that has been definitively proposed and held by the bishops of the world, always in communion with the Pope, on a matter of faith and morals, even when it has not been proposed in a definitive act of the extraordinary magisterium. To put it simply, and therefore to run the risk of putting it simplistically, we are talking here about the communion of faith amongst the bishops of the world, together with the Pope, on a matter of faith and morals which has been in the Church's possession and tradition as an essential element of the Church's identity and fidelity to God. This communion of faith is an expression of the Church's infallibility which, from time to time, will be expressed in the ordinary teaching of the Church. Many people would point to the belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary as an example of an infallible teaching of the Church which has never been formally proposed by an Ecumenical Council or as a dogma specifically proclaimed by the Pope exercising his charism of infallibility. This means for example that if Pope Francis were to issue a document on Mary in which he speaks about her perpetual virginity, he would not be proclaiming this infallibly himself, but rather giving expression to what is already an infallible teaching of the Church. A more recent and more contested example of the same thing is Pope John Paul II's teaching on the inadmissibility of women to the priesthood. Many theologians, including Pope Benedict, would propose that in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* Pope John Paul was not himself formally proclaiming this as a dogma of the Church; rather he was reaffirming that it was already a dogma of the Church, and therefore unchangeable, because it was part of the ordinary, infallible teaching of the Church.

These reflections can lead us to a brief look at the level of teaching authority which must be ascribed to *Amoris Laetitia*.

There are the three forms of infallible teaching: a solemn definition by an Ecumenical Council, an ex-cathedra teaching of the Pope, and a teaching promulgated through the ordinary universal magisterium of the Pope and bishops. In relation to the Pope's teachings these can be conveyed in a number of different ways, some of which are more solemn than others and some of which are more authoritative than others.

I just want to mention briefly the various forms of papal documents or discourses. I will move down from the more solemn to the less solemn. The level of solemnity does not always indicate the extent of the doctrinal teaching or authority being exercised.



A **Motu Proprio** is a document issued by the Pope on his own initiative. Often it will be a legal document, perhaps relating to the liturgy, and it carries the full force of papal authority. Pope Francis's decision to include St Joseph in the Eucharistic Prayers is an example of this.

An **Apostolic Constitution** is a solemn exercise of the Pope's authority often in matters of governance, such as the rules for running a papal election.

An **Encyclical** is a formal and deliberate act of teaching by the Pope in the form of a letter. *Humanae Vitae* was issued as an encyclical which was intended to clarify the Church's teaching in relation to the question of artificial contraception. It is a very solemn teaching which many would say gives expression to the infallible teaching of the ordinary universal magisterium.

An **Apostolic Letter** is less solemn than an encyclical but can still contain very important teaching from the Pope. The best recent example of this is *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Pope John Paul's letter launching the Church into the third millennium.

An **Apostolic Exhortation** is a document, similar to an apostolic letter, which a Pope issues, more often than not after a Synod of Bishops, to express his conclusions on the work of the Synod. *Amoris Laetitia* is an Apostolic Exhortation.

After this come homilies, addresses at general or specific audiences, discourses at events such as World Youth Day, and so on.

Clearly *Amoris Laetitia* is not as formal or as solemn as an Encyclical, but it is a much more formal and solemn exercise of the Pope's teaching role than an address at World Youth Day. We need to keep this in mind when we read, reflect on and evaluate *Amoris Laetitia*. We also need to remember that any of the above category of documents can and very often will contain teachings which fall under the rubric of the ordinary universal magisterium.

There is one last point I want to briefly make before I move on and it is this. An infallible teaching cannot contradict another infallible teaching. This should be abundantly clear. What is more complex is the challenge of discerning exactly what the content of the infallible teaching is. To say that Mary was assumed body and soul into the glory of heaven is to leave unanswered the question of the precise form and nature of the glorified body of Mary, or the particular nature of the relationship between the glorified body and the soul, or the precise nature of heaven. Infallible definitions often leave more much in mystery than they clarify.

Turning briefly to another perhaps more important aspect of the "context" question we do need to remember two things. Firstly that *Amoris Laetitia* is the Pope's considered response to the work of two Synods of Bishops in which he spent most of his time listening, although it is true that he made a small number of highly significant interventions. The Apostolic Exhortation is the fruit of his reflection on the wisdom of the gathered bishops who are, remember, successors of the apostles, gifted with the grace of episcopal ordination, subject of course, like all of us, to the dangers of temptation, weakness, and sin, but nevertheless empowered by God for the governance of the Church. They are at least as likely as the rest of us to be open to the working of God's Spirit and they would have, as least as much as the rest of us, a desire to be faithful to all that God is asking of them. We must not be naive, but nor must we be too suspicious or cynical: to do so would be to doubt the power of the Holy Spirit to vanquish the power of Satan.



The second point is the wider context of Francis's papacy. He has made, and continues to make, the call to mercy the heart of his mission as the present successor of Saint Peter. This was crystallised in the Year of Mercy, without a recognition of which the Synods, and the subsequent exhortation we are considering, are separated from their foundation. I myself am convinced that the Holy Spirit has inspired the Pope to identify mercy as that divine quality or characteristic, if I can use those anthropomorphic terms, which the Church in our time is called to rediscover, contemplate more deeply, and begin to practice more fully. If I am right then it may well be that the Lord is calling his Church to recognise that we have allowed other things to so dominate the life of the Church that God's mercy has been obscured. The Pope's oft-repeated insistence, for example, that going to Confession should not resemble finding yourself in a torture chamber, is a call to a profound examination of conscience on the part of our priests as to their manner of dealing with their penitents. The Pope's description of the Church as a field hospital where people's wounds are healed and their hearts warmed speaks powerfully to people today, partly perhaps because this is not how they have experienced the Church in the past. We must try to read *Amoris Laetitia* with this context in mind, and I would also say with that humility which allows us to recognise that the Church, in its leaders and its people, still has a long way to go before it is, in reality, what it is in theory and in theology; namely the living and powerful and unambiguous sign and instrument of the ongoing presence of Jesus among us as our saviour, our teacher, and our healer – as our Way, our Truth and our Life.

One of the reasons why *Amoris Laetitia* has been so difficult for so many people is precisely because it is a call to a humility, a recognition that there are many issues to which we do not have the complete answer, which can be rather confronting.

It has taken me a long time this evening to establish some sense of the context in which we must read and reflect on *Amoris Laetitia*. Let us now turn to the document itself.

As many of you would know it is a long document, as Pope Francis himself acknowledges. As an Apostolic Exhortation it is addressed to bishops, priests and deacons, consecrated persons, Christian married couples, and all the lay faithful. In other words it is addressed to the whole Catholic community precisely as a community of disciples who are called to live in fidelity to their Lord. No doubt the Pope hopes that others may also read and profit by this document but he is addressing his brothers and sisters in the faith. He is addressing us. And right at the start he counsels us not to undertake a rushed reading of the text, but rather to read each part carefully and patiently and even to focus on those sections which relate to our specific needs. He recognises that not everything he says will be immediately relevant for everyone who picks up the exhortation. And so he suggests that married couples might be particularly interested in chapters four and five, pastors in chapter six, and the whole community of faith in chapter eight. Right at the start he also makes a plea for the humility I mentioned a moment ago. Speaking of the discussions in the Synod hall he notes, and I quote:

The Synod process allowed for an examination of the situation of families in today's world, and thus for a broader vision and a renewed awareness of the importance of marriage and the family. The complexity of the issues that arose revealed the need for continued 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.* The debates carried on in the media, in certain publications and



even among the Church's ministers, range from *an immoderate desire for total change without sufficient reflection or grounding, to an attitude that would solve everything by applying general rules or deriving undue conclusions from particular theological considerations (italics my own)*.

For some the idea that doctrinal, moral, spiritual or pastoral questions might need to be discussed in order to arrive at greater clarity is itself challenging, especially when it comes to doctrine and morals. However, it is Blessed John Henry Newman, to whom I referred earlier, who is the great champion of what is called the development of doctrine in the Church. It has been the case from the very beginnings of Christianity that the Church has been caught up, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in the process of deepening its understanding of the revelation made to us in and through Jesus. As Newman proposed in his writings on this question, where there is no development we do not have life, but death. He used the analogy of the human person. I for example, look very different to the way I did sixty years ago when I was three years old. There has been a great deal of change taking place – had there not been I would be a very odd looking sixty-three year old now – but I was Tim Costelloe when I was three and I am Tim Costelloe now that I am sixty-three. What could never have happened was that I could at some stage have stopped being the human person Tim Costelloe and instead developed into some other form of non-human life. Underpinning the undeniable change there has remained a fundamental continuity and identity. For Newman the development of doctrine follows the same basic rule. What was once true cannot become untrue – but our understanding of the rich depths of this truth, what it might now be calling us to, and how it might be understood and explained more deeply, and more truly, in the light of other considerations or developments, can deepen and broaden. But such necessary and legitimate development will always be in continuity with the past and not in discontinuity with it. These are the kinds of considerations which we can bring to our reading of this exhortation, and perhaps especially in our reading of chapter eight.

Each of the chapters – there are nine of them in addition to the introduction from which I have just quoted – is very rich, sometimes dense in the best sense of that word, and often challenging. Each one needs careful pondering. Let me just, then, point to one or two gems from each paragraph.

The first chapter is based on the scriptures and centred around humanity as being created in the image and likeness of God. This is absolutely fundamental for what we today call our Christian anthropology. So many of the issues with which our contemporary world grapples come down to the question of the particular anthropological viewpoint a person or a culture adopts. The Christian anthropological viewpoint is fundamentally grounded in the scriptures. In particular we would look to the early chapters of the Book of Genesis, interpret them in the light of the incarnation, and look to Jesus, as he is revealed in the gospels read within the faith of the Catholic Church, as the one who, to quote *Gaudium et Spes*, “fully reveals humanity to itself and brings to light our most high calling” (GS22). At the heart of this anthropology is our belief that it is in the complementarity of man and woman, given to each other in mutual and lasting fidelity, that the vocation of humanity to be the image of the life-giving, creative God is most visibly realised. The depth of this vocation is revealed with the coming of Jesus and the revelation of the Trinitarian nature of God, which puts self-giving, and creative and overflowing love in a communion of mutual interdependence, at the heart of creation. Pope Francis invites us to enter into the depths of this Trinitarian mystery as fully as we can and he returns to this throughout the Exhortation. At the same time he recalls the tragic entry of sin into the world at the very beginning of human history to remind us of how



easily human relationships and human love can turn into domination, with all its tragic consequences. Much of *Amoris Laetitia* is an attempt to tease out how the Church, as the Sacrament of God's presence in our world, should respond to this tragedy.

Chapter two turns to a consideration of many of these tragic consequences. Pope Francis will identify "an overly individualistic culture, caught up with possessions and pleasure" as a clear sign of the infiltration of the consequences of sin into our individual and communal lives. Rather challengingly the Pope invites us to reflect on the ways in which we, as Catholics, may have contributed to many of the problems besetting marriage and family today, not just in society generally but also among our own people. Once again the Pope is calling us to a realistic humility.

"We also need", writes the Pope, "to be humble and realistic, acknowledging that at times the way we present our Christian beliefs and treat other people has helped contribute to today's problematic situation. We need a healthy dose of self-criticism.
We have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life. (36-37).

Here of course the Pope is not suggesting that we should not present the doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues – they are essential aspects of a life lived with true human integrity – but we must not fool ourselves that this will be enough to sustain couples in their life together. Christian marriage is a vocation – and like any vocation fidelity will only be sustained through an openness to the empowering grace of God.

In chapter three the Pope turns once again to Christ. It is the natural step to take given his insistence that we need to do more for couples and families than simply instruct them on their moral obligations. We need to help them discover the source of that fidelity which they will need to strive for the rest of their married lives – and that source is Christ, found within the communion of his Church. It is in chapter three that the Pope begins to turn more explicitly to an issue that for him is a major concern. How are we to assist, accompany and support those who are not, for a variety of reasons, living the fullness of married life as the Church understands it? The Pope hints at a possible approach which he will amplify somewhat later in the document. Quoting Pope John Paul 11's *Familiaris Consortio* Pope Francis remarks that

"When faced with difficult situations and wounded families, it is always necessary to recall this general principle: 'Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations' (*Familiaris Consortio*, 84).

Pope Francis then goes on to say that

The degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases and factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision. Therefore, while clearly stating the Church's teaching, pastors are to avoid judgements that do not take into account the complexity of various situations, and they are to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience and endure distress because of their condition" (79).

In chapter four the Pope provides a sustained reflection on the nature of human love and the way in which it is called to be an icon of divine love. Many people have commented that this chapter



could well form the basis of a renewed pre-marriage course, and I would suggest a post-marriage course as well, for couples marrying in the Church. We do not have time to discuss this now, but I would make the comment that also here the Pope, while speaking of the ideal, also reflects on the challenges involved in living up to the ideal and of the need therefore to be realistic and open to the need to make an effort to sustain and grow in a relationship of love. The Pope in this chapter also offers a very beautiful reflection on the two vocations of marriage and chaste celibacy, showing how each way of life can learn from and contribute to the fidelity of the other.

In chapter five the Pope turns to the relationship between marriage and the family. This is a chapter well worth reading and reflecting on often, especially in our present context in which the relationship between marriage and family which the Catholic tradition takes for granted is no longer widely accepted in our society. Paragraphs 172-177 in particular are worthy of careful attention as they offer an important reflection on the contributions which both mothers and fathers, in different but essential and complementary ways, make to the well-being of their children. This is a real challenge to those who would propose that our society should deliberately create family situations where it is impossible for children to be raised by a mother and a father.

In chapter six the Pope reflects on the many pastoral situations, challenges and difficulties to which the Church is called to respond in relationship to marriage and family. I must leave you all to read this for yourselves but it is in many ways a spelling out of what emerged in chapter two where the Pope insists that the Church's responsibility goes beyond the presentation of the doctrinal, moral and ethical issues but involves a real journeying with married couples and families. And lest we think that this is simply another responsibility that priests have to take on in addition to everything else we expect them to do, it is good to remember that when the Pope speaks of the Church he is not restricting himself to the clergy, or the religious, but is addressing an issue that is part of the vocation of every Christian, called into a community where people know and accept that they are mutually responsible for each other.

Chapter seven focuses on the education of children. The Pope is very strong on the fundamental right, obligation and privilege of parents as the primary educators of their children especially in the moral and affective areas. It is the place, the Pope says, where we break out of what he calls "our fatal self-absorption and come to realise that we are living with and alongside others who are worthy of our concern, our kindness and our affection". The Pope sees this happening in the day to day reality of family life and this, of course, challenges us to ask about the nature of our family life and whether or not we have structured it in such a way that will facilitate this kind of development in our children. The Pope also has some challenging things to say about sex education and the need for parents to communicate to their children the essential link between our sexual instincts and the need and desire to love and be loved. This is not a message that always fits easily into our contemporary society.

Chapter eight is the second last chapter and the one which has caused so much controversy. One of the problems of this chapter and the controversy surrounding some aspects of it is that it has shifted the focus away from the document as a whole and from the richness the document offers the Church and our wider society. Precisely for that reason I do not intend to spend too much time on this chapter although it is necessary to make a few remarks. Firstly the title of the chapter is important: *Accompanying, discerning and integrating weakness*. It seems to me that this chapter, at its heart, is challenging us to hold together the high ideals of our faith and the reality that so many of us struggle to reach those high ideals. While this is undoubtedly true of



marriage and family life, it is also potentially true of every area of our lives. Who of us here tonight can say of ourselves that in any area of our lives we have no room for further development, improvement or conversion? And who of us here would be brave enough to say that we knew another person's situation so well that we could form an absolute and infallible judgement of that person's standing before God? I am reminded of the Lord's advice that his disciples would need to take the plank out of their own eye before they could presume to take the speck out of another person's eye. Similarly I am reminded of Jesus's invitation to those who were without sin to cast the first stone at the woman caught in adultery. As we remember the by-standers all walked away, knowing that they could not condemn another when they were not perfect themselves.

Pope Francis expresses it this way: the Church, by which he means everyone and not just the clergy, *must hold up the call to perfection and ask for a fuller response to God while at the same time accompanying with attention and care the weakest of her children*. As I indicated earlier in this address I am convinced that Pope Francis is calling the Church back to an approach of mercy which he discerns, and many others would also discern, has been obscured in the life of the Church for too long. In chapter eight of *Amoris Laetitia* Pope Francis is calling the Church to find a better way of assisting its members who are struggling, for a whole host of reasons, to live the fullness of the Christian ideal.

It is important here to note that Pope Francis is not suggesting, and could not suggest, that the Church abandon its ideals or change its doctrinal teaching. Nor is he suggesting that it is objectively impossible for people to live up to the call or the demands of the gospel. God always offers us the grace to be faithful. What I think he is saying is that it may be subjectively impossible for a person, at the present time, to do so. This has long been the traditional teaching of the Church in moral theology. This teaching draws a distinction between the objective nature of a situation or an action and the level of subjective responsibility. An extreme example would be the question of an abortion which is always and in every circumstance objectively evil – an innocent human life is always destroyed – and the level of subjective responsibility for the woman who has the abortion or the person or persons who assist her in obtaining an abortion. Such responsibility may be diminished or even nullified if they truly believe that it is the right and good thing to do in the circumstances. One of the questions implicitly imposed by *Amoris Laetitia* is to what extent the principle of diminished subjective responsibility can be applied to what the Church has traditionally called irregular situations. A variety of answers have been and continue to be given to this question. This is confusing and unsettling for many but I think we have no option other than to accept that it will take time for this matter to be finally resolved. At the moment the Church's objective position is clear: those who are in an irregular situation – living together without being married, living in a second marriage while the first marriage has not been annulled, living in a de-facto relationship or a same-sex relationship and so on – should not receive Communion because their objective living situation is not in harmony with the Church's teaching and one of the essential elements of Eucharistic communion is that it is a sign of the person's communion with the faith of the Church. The logic is similar to that which would, in normal circumstances, indicate that those who belong to other Christian traditions, and who do not share our belief in the Eucharist and whose communion with us is imperfect, also should not receive Holy Communion. The Church's judgment at the moment, and it is a disciplinary judgment but one deriving from theological considerations, is that those Catholics in "irregular" relationships should not receive communion. I think Pope Francis is asking theologians to investigate whether or not the disciplinary provisions in this matter are the logical and inevitable result of the theological principles. This was certainly the conclusion reached by Pope John Paul 11 and expressed in *Familiaris Consortio* where he



spoke about the need for people in such situations to live as “brother and sister”. There is no final agreement as yet as to whether in this disciplinary matter there is room for further theological development which could admit of some situations where John Paul’s basic position can be modified.

It may help us to understand this if I refer briefly to a controversy which arose during the time of Pope Pius XI in relation to his encyclical, *Humani generis*. This encyclical, promulgated in 1950, was directed at addressing what the Pope called “*some false opinions threatening to undermine the foundations of Catholic doctrine*”. At a certain stage the Pope addresses the question of polygenism, that is the theory that all human beings do not descend from a common ancestor, namely Adam, but from multiple ancestors and that in the bible “Adam” is not to be understood as a single human being but as that group of humans from which all other humans originate. While the Pope indicates that Catholics cannot embrace such a position he expresses this with a certain caution. “*It is in no way apparent,*” he says, “*how such an opinion can be reconciled with that which the sources of revealed truth and the documents of the Teaching Authority of the Church propose with regard to original sin*” (37). Such a phraseology leaves open the possibility that it might one day become apparent how polygenism might be compatible with the Church’s teaching on Original Sin. It is not my intention tonight to discuss this question, fascinating though it is. I simply want to suggest that without saying so explicitly, Pope Francis might be understood to be adopting the same approach. To paraphrase Pope Pius XI, might Pope Francis be saying, “*it may not be presently apparent how the Church’s discipline in relation to the reception of communion might be changed without undermining or contradicting the Church’s doctrinal teaching on the indissolubility of marriage, but perhaps further prayer, reflection and theological study might clarify this for us.*”

In these remarks on the controversial chapter eight of *Amoris Laetitia* I have focused very narrowly on the single aspect of whether or not divorced and civilly remarried Catholics might be permitted under some circumstances to receive Communion at Mass. I have done so because this is what has generated so much discussion and even dissension in some parts of the Church. However in deciding to do this I do not want to finish without returning to where we started this evening. It would be a significant mistake to come to *Amoris Laetitia* in a way which does not situate it in the context of Pope Francis’s urgent call to the Church to reflect more fully the face of God whose name, Pope Francis tells us, is mercy. It is right and proper to consider some of the specific questions which the document, and in particular chapter eight, raises in our minds, but if this means that we avoid the urgent call to a greater compassion, a deeper humility, and a more gentle and loving accompaniment of our brothers and sisters who are struggling to live their faith fully, as indeed we all are in different ways, then we may be deserving of the very condemnation which Jesus levelled at some of the religious leaders of his own time: *you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with heavy burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift a finger to help them*” (Matt 23:4).