

DICASTERIUM
PRO DOCTRINA FIDEI

25 September 2023

HIS HOLINESS

FRANCIS

Holy Father,

Having received from you a copy of your letter of 11 July 2023, in which you respond to five *Dubia* of Cardinal Burke and Cardinal Brandmüller, I request your authorization so that the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith may take into consideration and eventually quote some paragraphs of these responses in order to better clarify the questions submitted to you.

+ Víctor Manuel FERNÁNDEZ
Prefect

Ex audientia die – 25/9/2023

Franciscus

DUBIA

1. *Dubium regarding the assertion that the Divine Revelation should be reinterpreted based on current cultural and anthropological changes.*

Following the statements of some bishops, which have neither been corrected nor retracted, **it is asked whether Divine Revelation should be reinterpreted in the Church according to the cultural changes of our time and according to the new anthropological vision promoted by these changes; or if Divine Revelation is forever binding, immutable, and thus, not to be contradicted,** following the dictum of the Second Vatican Council, which states that “the obedience of faith” is owed to God who reveals (*Dei Verbum*, n. 5); that what is revealed for the salvation of all nations must remain “forever whole and alive” and be “handed on to all generations” (n. 7); and that progress in understanding does not imply any change in the truth of things and of the words, since faith is “handed on once and for all” (n. 8) and the Magisterium is not above the Word of God, but teaches only that which has been handed on (n. 10).

2. *Dubium regarding the affirmation that the widespread practice of blessing same-sex unions is in accordance with Revelation and the Magisterium (CCC 2357).*

According to the Divine Revelation, attested to in Sacred Scripture, which the Church teaches, “listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit” (*Dei Verbum*, n. 10): “*In principio*” [“In the beginning”] God created man in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them, and blessed them so that they may be fruitful (cf. Gen. 1:27-28). For this reason, the Apostle Paul teaches that denying sexual difference is the consequence of denying the Creator (Rom. 1:24-32). **It is asked: can the Church derogate from this “*principio*,” considering it as a mere ideal—in contrast to what was taught in *Veritatis Splendor*, 103—and accepting as a “possible good” objectively sinful situations, such as unions with persons of the same sex, without departing from revealed doctrine?**

3. *Dubium regarding the assertion that synodality is a “constitutive dimension of the Church” (Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis communio*, 6), such that the Church is by nature synodal.*

Since the Synod of Bishops does not represent the College of Bishops but is merely an advisory body of the Pope, insofar as Bishops, as witnesses of the faith, cannot delegate their confession of the truth, **it is asked whether synodality can be the supreme regulatory criterion of the permanent governance of the Church without distorting**

its constitutive structure, desired by its Founder, by which the supreme and full authority of the Church is exercised both by the Pope by virtue of his office and by the College of Bishops together with its head, the Roman Pontiff (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 22).

4. *Dubium regarding the support of pastors and theologians for the theory that “the theology of the Church has changed,” and thus, that priestly ordination can be conferred on women.*

Following the statements of some prelates, which have neither been corrected nor retracted, according to whom the theology of the Church and the meaning of the Mass changed with Vatican II, **it is asked whether the dictum of the Second Vatican Council is still valid, which states that the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood “differ from one another in essence and not only in degree”** (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 10), and that priests, by the “sacred power of orders to offer sacrifice and to forgive sins” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2), act in the name and in the person of Christ the Mediator, through whom the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is made perfect? **Furthermore, it is asked whether the teaching of St. John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* is still valid, which teaches the impossibility of conferring priestly ordination on women as a truth to be held definitively**, whereby this teaching is no longer subject to change or to free discussion by pastors or theologians.

5. *Dubium regarding the affirmation that “forgiveness is a human right” and the insistence of the Holy Father on the duty to absolve everyone and always, by which repentance would not be a necessary condition for sacramental absolution.*

It is asked whether the teaching of the Council of Trent is still in force, which states that, for the validity of sacramental confession, the contrition of the penitent is necessary: a contrition that consists in detesting the sin that has been committed and resolving not to sin again (Session XIV, Chapter IV: DH 1676), such that the priest must defer absolution when it is clear that this condition has not been met.

Vatican City, 10 July 2023

[*signed*]
Walter Card. BRANDMÜLLER

[*signed*]
Raymond Leo Card. BURKE

Juan Card. SANDOVAL ÍÑIGUEZ

Robert Card. SARAH

Joseph Card. ZEN ZE-KIUN, S.D.B.

Dear Brothers,

Although it does not always seem prudent to me to respond to questions directly addressed to my person, and it would be impossible to answer all of them, I have deemed it appropriate to do so in this case, given the proximity of the Synod.

Question 1

(a) The answer depends on the meaning you give to the word “to reinterpret.” If it is understood as meaning “to interpret better,” the expression is valid. In this sense, the Second Vatican Council affirmed that it is necessary that with the work of exegetes—and, I would add, with that of theologians—“the judgment of the Church may *mature*” (VATICAN II, 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 her unfathomable richness and that she always needs to grow in *understanding* it.

(c) As a result, the Church also matures in the understanding of what she herself has affirmed in her Magisterium.

(d) Cultural changes and new historical challenges do not change Revelation; they can, however, stimulate us to explain better certain aspects of its overflowing richness, which always has more to offer.

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

(f) It is true, on the other hand, that the Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but it is also true that the texts of Scripture and the testimonies of Tradition require an interpretation that allows their perennial substance to be distinguished from cultural conditioning. This 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 require

an interpretation. The same applies to certain considerations in the New Testament regarding women (1 Cor. 11:3-10; 1 Tim. 2:11-14) and to 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 that which has been revealed “for the *salvation* of all” (VATICAN II, 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 connected with this goal. In this regard, I would like to recall what St. Thomas Aquinas affirmed: “The more one descends 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 can never be adequately understood if it is presented alone, *isolated* from the rich and harmonious context of the whole of Revelation. The “hierarchy of truths” also implies situating each truth in proper connection with the more central truths, and with the entirety of the Church’s teaching. This ultimately can give rise to different ways of expounding the same doctrine, even though “for 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*, 49). Every theological line has its risks, but also its opportunities.

Question 2

(a) The Church has a very clear understanding of marriage: it is an exclusive, stable, and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation of children. Only this type of union does the Church call a “marriage.” Other forms of union realize it only in “a partial and analogous way” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 292), which is why they cannot be called “marriage,” strictly speaking.

(b) This is not just a question of names. The reality we call marriage has an essential constitution that is unique; as a result, it requires an exclusive name that is not applicable to other realities. Undoubtedly, it is much more than a mere “ideal.”

(c) For this reason, the Church avoids any type of rite or sacramental that might contradict this conviction and imply that something that is not marriage is being recognized as marriage.

(d) Nevertheless, in our dealings with people, we must not lose pastoral charity, which should permeate all our decisions and attitudes. The defense of objective truth is not the only expression of this charity; it also includes kindness, patience, understanding, tenderness, and encouragement. Therefore, we cannot become judges who only deny, reject, and exclude.

(e) For this reason, pastoral prudence must adequately discern whether there are forms of blessing, requested by one or more persons, that do not convey an erroneous conception of marriage. For, when one asks for a blessing, one is expressing a petition for God’s assistance, a plea to live better, and confidence in a Father who can help us live better.

(f) On the other hand, even though there are situations that are not morally acceptable from an objective point of view, the same pastoral charity requires us not to treat simply as “sinners” those whose guilt or responsibility may be attenuated by various factors affecting subjective imputability (cf. ST. JOHN PAUL II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 17).

(g) Decisions that may be part of pastoral prudence in certain circumstances should not necessarily become a norm. That is to say, it is not appropriate for a Diocese, a

Bishops' Conference, or any other ecclesial structure to constantly and officially establish procedures or rituals for all kinds of matters, since not everything that "is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances can be elevated to the level of a rule" as this "would lead to an intolerable casuistry" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 304). Canon Law should not and cannot cover everything, nor should the Episcopal Conferences claim to do so with their various documents and protocols, since the life of the Church flows through many channels besides the normative ones.

Question 3

(a) Although you acknowledge that the supreme and full authority of the Church is exercised both by the Pope by virtue of his office and by the College of Bishops together with its Head, who is the Roman Pontiff (cf. VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 22), nevertheless, with these *dubia* you express your need to participate, to express your opinion freely, and to collaborate, and thereby you are invoking a 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; rather, it necessarily implies real participation, that not only the hierarchy, but *all the People of God*—in various ways and at different levels—may make its voice heard and feel part of the Church’s journey. In this sense, we can 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 his Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*.

(c) It is quite another thing to sacralize or impose a particular synodal methodology that appeals to one group, turning it into a norm and an obligatory path for everyone, because this would only “freeze” the synodal journey, ignoring the different characteristics of the Particular Churches and the varied richness of the Universal Church.

Question 4

(a) “The common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood differ essentially” (VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 10). It is not appropriate to argue for a difference in degree that would entail considering the common priesthood of the faithful as something belonging to a “second class” or of lesser value (“a lower grade”); both forms of priesthood illuminate and support each other.

(b) When St. John Paul II taught that we must affirm “definitively” the impossibility of conferring priestly ordination on women, he was in no way denigrating women and giving a supreme power to men. St. John Paul II also affirmed other things. For example, when we speak of priestly authority, “we are in the realm of *function*, not of *dignity* and *holiness*” (ST. JOHN PAUL II, *Christifideles Laici*, 51): these are words that we have not sufficiently embraced. He also clearly sustained that while the priest alone presides at the Eucharist, the 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*, VI). He also stated that while the priestly function is “hierarchical,” it should not be understood as a form of domination but “is *totally* ordered to the holiness of the members of Christ” (ST. JOHN PAUL II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 27). If this fact is not understood and the practical consequences are not drawn from these distinctions, it will be difficult to accept that the priesthood is reserved only for men; we will, likewise, 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, let us recognize that a clear and authoritative doctrine on the exact nature of a “definitive declaration” has not yet been fully developed. It is not a dogmatic definition, and yet it must be adhered to by all. No one can publicly contradict it, and yet it can be a subject of study, as with 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 purpose of amendment not to sin. But there is no mathematics here, and once again, I must remind you that the confessional is not a tollhouse. 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 preserved, are aids of the Holy Spirit for people's lives.

(b) There are many ways to express repentance. Often, in people who have a very wounded self-esteem, declaring themselves guilty is a cruel torment. Yet, the very fact of approaching confession is a symbolic expression of repentance and the search for divine help.

(c) I also want to recall that "sometimes we find it hard to make room for the unconditional love of God" in pastoral care (*Amoris Laetitia*, 311), yet we must learn to do so. Following St. John Paul II, I maintain that we should not demand from the faithful overly precise and certain purposes of amendment, which end up being abstract or even egocentric, and that even the possibility of a new fall "should not prejudice the authenticity of the resolution" (ST. JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Cardinal William W. Baum on the Occasion of the Course on the Internal Forum Organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary* [22 March 1996], 5).

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

Francis