

**A Pastoral Appeal to the Bishops  
for an Apostolic Reaffirmation of the Gospel**

(Official Text)

Good Shepherd Sunday  
22 April 2018

Your Eminence or Your Excellency,

As priests ordained to assist in the pastoral care of God's people, we write to request your help in dealing with a mistaken approach to the Christian moral life that we frequently encounter and that grievously harms those misled by it. We believe much of the damage could be healed or mitigated if you were to reaffirm Christ's teachings and to correct those errors with the full authority of your apostolic office. Doing so would benefit those entrusted to your care as a diocesan bishop, and as a Successor of the Apostles you would contribute greatly to the unity and well-being of the universal Church. Our pastoral concern is that without such assistance this detrimental situation will worsen significantly.

In its basic form, the mistaken approach asserts that those who commit objectively evil acts and judge themselves subjectively free of culpability must be allowed to receive Holy Communion. In a more developed form, it denies that certain behaviors are always evil and claims that in some circumstances those behaviors are the most realistic good that can be achieved or, indeed, are simply good. An even more extreme version declares that those behaviors can be approved or proposed by God. Christ's life and moral teachings are thus presented as abstract ideals that must be adjusted to fit our circumstances rather than as realities already attuned to free us from sin and evil in every situation.

Although this approach claims to be a new and legitimate development, its principles have always been recognized by the Church as contrary to the Gospel. She opposed these theories with particularly vigorous and precise teaching throughout the twentieth century and, above all, during the fifty years since *Humanae Vitae*. We believe the recent resurgence of this damaging approach despite such sustained ecclesial efforts demonstrates clearly that a more effective pastoral response is needed than parish priests can offer by themselves or than can be adequately provided by the limited authority of conventional diocesan and regional statements. That is why we are asking you to consider exercising your full apostolic authority through a formal reaffirmation of the Gospel and correction of these errors. This would offer the entire Church an apostolic witness uniquely capable of sustaining and guiding the clergy and laity in the urgent tasks of helping those who have been harmed and of developing authentic pastoral initiatives to reach out to all the world.

We recognize that the exercise of apostolic authority and the manner of its expression are matters for each bishop to decide. As priests, we wish in a fraternal and filial spirit to offer for your consideration the following affirmations of the Gospel focused on ten crucial issues we hope you would formally address. Please receive them as a witness to the Faith we profess in communion with the College of Bishops and its head, the Bishop of Rome:

- 1) God is love. He has arranged everything for our good and has called us to share his divine life in Christ. Consequently, he is utterly opposed to evil, to sin (i.e., the knowing and willing embrace of evil), and to the harm that these cause. Therefore, although God may choose to tolerate the presence of evil and sin, he never proposes or approves of them.
- 2) Christians participating in the indwelling communion with God (i.e., in a state of grace) are in every circumstance enabled by Christ to remain faithful by avoiding the knowing and willing embrace of evil; therefore, they are culpable for any sins they commit (see I Jn 5:18 and Jas 1:13-15). This is true even when fidelity requires suffering, privation, or death because what is humanly impossible is possible by God's grace (see Mt 19:26 and Sir 15:15). Thus, fidelity to Christ and his teachings is realistic and achievable, not an abstract ideal needing to be adjusted to circumstances of life.
- 3) Christians in communion with God may suffer from ignorance or from impediments to freedom to a degree that mitigates or entirely removes culpability in a particular embrace of evil. Although

what they do is actually (i.e., objectively) evil and thus harmful to themselves and others in various ways, they can be personally (i.e., subjectively) not culpable of sin and therefore remain morally unharmed.

- 4) Christians who embrace evil without culpability remain in communion with God, but are trapped in situations that are actually harmful and prevent them from fully sharing the abundant life Jesus came to bring. The task of the Church is to help heal and free them by patiently bringing the grace and truth of his Gospel.
- 5) Conscience is the immediate norm of behavior but not the infallible voice of God. It can misjudge due to innocent malformation or to distortions arising from previous sins. In the latter case, one who follows conscience or judges himself free of culpability may nevertheless be guilty of sin. Given these limitations, the subjective judgments of conscience are in need of being conformed to the Gospel revealed by Christ and continually proclaimed by him through the Church's authentic apostolic witness (e.g., the Ordinary and Extraordinary Magisterium).
- 6) Marriage is a covenant established knowingly and willingly with requisite consideration and maturity by one man and one woman who are free to marry. It is an exclusive union that cannot be dissolved by any human power or by any cause except the death of one of the spouses. The spousal union of Christ and the Church is the foundation of this conjugal bond, both in human nature and in the Sacrament of Marriage (see Gen 2:24; Mt 19:3-6; Eph 5:32; and II Tim 2:13).
- 7) Sexual activity outside of marriage is in every circumstance gravely evil. The culpable embrace of this grave evil is a mortal sin which, like all mortal sins, causes communion with God to cease.
- 8) To receive Holy Communion, Christians who recognize that they are guilty of mortal sin must have true contrition for their sins, including a resolve to avoid all sin in the future. In addition, they must normally first receive the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.
- 9) Reception of Holy Communion cannot be reduced to a private act based on a subjective judgment of innocence because it is a public witness to one's embrace of the communal faith and life of the Church. Regardless of culpability, those who continue to embrace an objectively grave evil after learning that their belief or behavior is contrary to the Church's apostolic witness may rightly be expected or, at times, required to refrain from Holy Communion. This ecclesial discipline is a pastoral means for bringing them to recognize and renounce the evil so that they can be freed of it and more fully share Christ's abundant life. Such an approach reflects the teaching of Jesus and the Apostles, who based ecclesial discipline on the objective failure to accord with the Church's life, not on a judgment of culpability (see Mt 18:17; I Cor 5:11-13; Gal 1:9; and I Jn 4:6). Holy Communion may also be withheld to avoid misleading others regarding the faith and life of the Gospel (i.e., causing scandal; see Mt 18:6).
- 10) Reception of Holy Communion in specific cases by those who have remarried following a divorce depends on the objective reality of the bond of their first marriage and on the avoidance of sin and public scandal, not only on their private intention to avoid future sexual activity, their subjective evaluation of the current relationship, or their subjective judgment of innocence regarding sexual activity in that relationship (see Mt 5:32).

In making our appeal we would like to encourage you not to underestimate the pastoral value of the apostolic support and direction that you could provide the universal Church, even as an individual bishop. We are keenly aware as priests that many of the clergy and laity have been so affected by secular mentalities and the false moral theology of past decades that they now view the Church's apostolic witness as idealistic, outmoded, or even cruel. Hence, they often mistakenly perceive pastoral affirmations of that witness as abstractions, legalisms, or personal condemnations. This is extremely painful for everyone involved. The experience can be discouraging for priests and could lead us to avoid offering a clear and authentic presentation of the Gospel. However, we are blessed to know many clerics and laypersons whose lives have been transformed by embracing Christ's teachings, even when this entailed suffering. They now rejoice in the Church's witness that once seemed unrealistic or hostile. At the same time, they have a deep sense of grief and betrayal over the advocacy of errors that leave others trapped in harmful situations similar to the ones they experienced. Nevertheless, they find hope and offer us encouragement by recalling that they were set free through the power of Christ's grace and truth

working in the unambiguous and loving witness of a particular priest or layperson. All the more, then, would the personal witness of a bishop, expressed with the pastoral care and full authority of a Successor of the Apostles, provide an effective means for Christ to gather, support, and guide his people.

We thank you for the courtesy of considering this appeal.

Praying that God sustain you in his service and asking for your blessing, we remain,

Your brothers in priestly and apostolic ministry:

(For an updated list of signers, see [www.curapastoralis.org](http://www.curapastoralis.org))