

# The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

The publication of the pope's letter, *Amoris Laetitia*, leads to the theme of this issue, "Where is the Pope?" A quick answer might be that he is in Rome except when he is flying to some other part of the world. A more substantive meaning to that question is where does the pope stand (or sit) in relation to the internal conflicts of the worldwide Roman Catholic Church? A fairly certain answer to where the pope stands is: in the middle. The middle is at first glance the safest place to be though someone might think that in a clash of opposing parties there is no middle. Or as the Texas commentator Jim Hightower put it: "There is nothing in the middle of the road except a yellow streak and dead armadillos."

To interpret the pope's taking a middle position as cowardice or lack of conviction would be unfair. His admirable intention seems to be that he wishes to return decisions about how to lead a good life to the consciences of people who would be aided in their decisions by Catholic tradition and helpful ministers. The pope cannot act in a direct way to do that. If he were to move aggressively in either direction it would undercut his overall aim of moving authority away from the pope to the various bodies (starting with each human body) where authority should be located. The pope seems, consciously or not, to be using his celebrity status as pope to destroy the modern papacy, that is, the outsized role that the pope has had in the Roman Catholic Church since the nineteenth century.

There are still people who are expecting this pope to make a dramatic pronouncement of a change of doctrines. It seems unlikely that he would even if he wished to do so. He seems to think that the doctrines that most interest the non-Catholic world, especially those pertaining to sex, do not need to be changed. On the other hand, he has regularly tossed out one-liners that many people think imply a change of doctrine. There is little doubt that he will leave to his successor a church with a better public image but also a pent-up pressure for doctrinal change.

This issue contains an essay by Gabriel Moran relating *Amoris Laetitia* to the pope's previous writing, followed by two comments: Ross Douthat and James Carroll have similar descriptions of what the pope has written. But Carroll believes that the effect is a radical improvement of the church; Douthat thinks that the pope is destroying the church.

## PAPAL STYLE

By Gabriel Moran

From the first days of his papacy Pope Francis caught the attention of the whole world with his moves to get rid of the pope's monarchical trappings. He has continued to do things with the seeming purpose of de-absolutizing the papacy. Papal style refers to the way that the pope has acted in his personal life. No one could have predicted how powerful would be the effect of that stylistic change. In small but consistent ways he has managed to change the attitude of millions of people toward the Catholic Church. He has done the things a pope should do and he has avoided doing things that would slip him back into the wildly inflated role that the pope was given at the First Vatican Council. The brilliant but short rein of Pope John XXIII had begun the process but it was effectively reversed by his three successors. Pope Francis has already had a longer papacy than Pope John but he seems acutely aware that his time is short and that he wishes to provide a shift in direction that will be very difficult for a successor to undo.

Of course, the king's change does not mean that all the king's men share in the mission. The pope's success depends not merely in divesting himself of the personal symbols of a monarch but of eliminating the Vatican bureaucracy's stranglehold on church affairs. Vatican officials do not much care for their loss of power. The Vatican is famous for its centuries of intrigues; the battles during the last three years are probably the stuff of some great mystery novels. At least, the world can be grateful that Pope Francis has not been assassinated. At an event in which the pope was greeting a group of pilgrims, one of them gave the pope some food. The pope's handlers were shocked that he ate it. "Didn't you realize that the food might have been poisoned," they asked the pope. "Oh, come on," the pope replied, "they were pilgrims, not cardinals." He was joking – right?

An example of how the Vatican bureaucracy can be quietly undone is the change in the process of what the Catholic Church calls "annulment." At the 2014 synod, a proposed change which did not draw much notice was the recommendation that annulment of marriage could be carried out by the local bishop. The annulment process has been one of the biggest scandals in the Catholic Church for decades, if not centuries. It was widely known that if you had enough money and influence you could get an annulment of a marriage. Legions of lawyers were employed to keep up the pretense that the Catholic Church does not recognize divorce. For the millions of ordinary Catholics who lacked the money and the patience to go through Rome's annulment process, a civil divorce was their only alternative. The official Catholic Church is slowly finding its way to admitting that some marriages never took hold, other marriages have died. Divorce has many different meanings but for some people it can be a positive step. For many years to come, the official Catholic Church will continue to talk about annulment but the result will be indistinguishable from what everyone else calls divorce.

Style, besides a way of acting, is a term that applies to how a person uses written language. I am less enthusiastic about this pope's style when it comes to his published documents. One tendency seems to be that the documents keep getting longer. That fact can indicate increasing precision in what is written; it can also be a sign of covering up

problems that are unclear or questions that one is trying to avoid. The most recent document, *Amoris Laetitia*, is 57,000 words or 256 pages. That is one a half times as long as *Laudato si* which was already too long. I don't think the pope should do his teaching via Twitter but his one-liners have been more effective than his prolix style of writing.

The first major document that Pope Francis did, *Evangelii Gaudium*, had a relatively brief section that was a direct hit on the bad aspects of capitalism. His criticism was dismissed by rich U. S. Catholics (as well as the Cardinal of New York) who said that the pope did not understand the glorious workings of the capitalist system in the United States. The pope did not try to get into the intricacies of economic theory. He stood on the firm ground of condemning the unlimited greed of people who seem to think that they need a few billion dollars to be happy. There is no direct connection between the papal letter and economic protests that have arisen in the last couple of years in the United States, but the pope's clear call was important to anyone receptive to what he said.

The pope's encyclical on the environment, *Laudato si*, was a greatly anticipated document. In fact, people were lined up for and against the document long before it was published. That was not a good sign. The premise seemed to be that the papal encyclical would or would not be an endorsement of the science of climate change. The news media mainly responded to the actual publication by saying he had voted yes. But why take 37,000 words to vote yes? The encyclical's main point seemed to be the pope's attempt to link the environmental movement and the problem of world poverty. But I am afraid that point was largely obscured in the document's mix of environmental concerns, biblical exegesis, and theological doctrines. The document was an attempt to speak to a worldwide audience about an issue of universal concern. Hence, style was crucial. I think commentators were polite enough that they did not say that most of the document was a dud. As papal encyclicals go, it wasn't particularly bad style but papal documents, as Cardinal Schönborn joked, "do not belong to one of the most accessible literary genres."

In *Laudato si* there were a couple of important points that needed to be made about the environmental movement and its relation to the Catholic Church. The pope was unaware or chose to ignore that the environmental movement has from the beginning been set in opposition to what it calls "Judeo-Christian tradition." Instead of taking apart that concocted ideological term of the 1890s, the pope actually used it three times in the document. Instead of criticizing the charge of "anthropocentrism," the pope simply used the term with a twist that suggested he was unacquainted with how the term has been at the center of the attack on "Judeo-Christian tradition." The environmental claim that Christianity is the cause of our environmental problems is centered on a single text of the bible: "God gave man dominion over the earth" (Gen.1:28). The encyclical goes on for a dozen pages of biblical exegesis without confronting the problem simply and directly.

The document *Amoris Laetitia* is almost entirely about Catholic Church affairs. Even here, however, there is interest in some of these concerns because the Catholic Church has great direct and indirect influence on public policies. The recent synod was miles apart from previous synods that were scripted affairs without even the hint of surprise. With the pope's encouragement, the recent synod engaged in fairly open discussions that

inevitably involved some infighting by opposing sides. The synod's theme was the family, a topic on which Catholic bishops would not seem to be especially knowledgeable. And unlike Vatican II, the bishops at the synod were on their own without the "experts" who largely determined the direction of Vatican II.

The bishops of the synod as well as the pope continue to avoid the elephant sitting in the middle of the room, namely, the ban on "contraceptives." Most members of the U.S. Catholic Church have decided, based on their experience and consciences, that the official position makes no sense. The only question is how to reconcile the official teaching with what has been decided by the people involved. The pope's letter has this startling sentence: "Not all doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by intervention of the magisterium." That last word is the obscurantism by which bishops refer to themselves. What the pope seems to endorse here is that the official doctrine of the Catholic Church has been changed by the people with no help from the bishops.

The pope recently pronounced that contraceptives might be used in the midst of a Zika epidemic because contraceptives "are not an absolute evil." Some of the press hailed this statement as a step forward. Perhaps it is the best that this pope can do and it is in fact consistent with the way that church doctrine in the past has often changed. But in the glare of today's news media the approach hardly seems up to the challenge which Catholic Church officials face of admitting that not only are contraceptives not an "absolute evil" but that they are a moral necessity, especially in the poverty stricken parts of the world which the pope is so concerned with. The pope's encyclical on the environment was undermined by his statement that for eliminating poverty "some can only propose a reduction in the birth rate." Perhaps there are people who simplistically think that distributing condoms is a cure for poverty but almost everyone deeply involved in the issue thinks that control of births is an indispensable element of any solutions to poverty. And they see the Catholic Church's official policy to be a big obstacle.

The pope makes an admirable effort in this latest document to understand what is going on among women throughout the world. He says that "we must see in the women's movement the working of the Spirit for a clearer recognition of the dignity and rights of women." That is a giant step in papal rhetoric even if it is still unclear that the pope grasps what the women's movement is calling for in equality of treatment for women. It is hardly surprising that a pope lacks experience, knowledge, and understanding of women. But where are the women advisers when it comes to publishing a document on the family. Surely, someone – even a man – should have recognized that the title of paragraph 9, "You and your wife," would not go over well with the people who make up a majority of the Catholic Church.

It was a great surprise in 2014 when the synod brought up homosexuality as a topic to discuss at a meeting whose theme was the family. The final reports of the discussion were disappointing to people who had been encouraged by the first week of the 2014 meeting. Apparently, a small group of bishops were able to get out for public consumption a very positive statement about homosexuality, including adoption by gay and lesbian couples. The majority of bishops were horrified at those ideas and succeeded in keeping the final

reports of the synod firmly under their control. But the discussion of homosexuality acknowledges its existence; that's actually new. It may still take a long while but the official Catholic Church is inevitably on the way to the acceptance of homosexuality.

The key to this shift toward acceptance is two changes of language: First, the pope's use of the word "gay" (even though the synod reports still talk of "the homosexuals" as if gay people were an alien species). Second, more important was the admission of the term "homosexual orientation" in the synod reports and *Amoris Laetitia*. The press entirely missed the significance of this language. Vatican documents had previously cited the term "homosexual orientation" only to condemn it. The Vatican had insisted that homosexuality is an "objective disorder," and therefore homosexual behavior could only be understood as an (unnatural) perversion of the sexual faculty. In contrast, if people have a "homosexual orientation," then homosexual activity is a (natural) expression of the person's life. In the logic of the Catholic Church's sacramental principle, a person's inward life should be able to find external expression. Many bishops were probably unaware of the significance of "homosexual orientation" but there is no going back.

The synod report was unnecessarily harsh in condemning same sex marriage; and the pope simply repeated the synod's words: "There are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family" There is not much point, however, in discussing the church's attitude to same-sex marriage. The prior question is gay and lesbian sex. The pope has some surprisingly positive things to say about sexuality and the value of the "erotic" but his imagination in this area may be limited. He opposes the teaching of "safe sex" because it is "as if an eventual child were an enemy to be protected against." An "eventual child" is not an enemy but surely not what most seventeen-year-olds can manage. If homosexual behavior were accepted then one might have an interesting discussion about same sex marriage. The pope says unions that are closed to the transmission of new life should not be recognized as marriage. I do not know where that leaves sixty-year old heterosexual couples or infertile couples of any age.

The issue of communion for divorced and remarried Catholics is of intense interest to millions of Catholics but not of much concern for the rest of the world. The issue has been left ambiguous by the synod and the pope. There seems to be a willingness on this point to be flexible depending on the situation of individuals. An emphasis on local situations, including a person's conscience, would seem to be a healthy direction. The only drawback is the possible arbitrariness of local priests deciding on who is worthy of communion. Bishops who are adamant in opposing any change have logic on their side. Admitting "adulterers" to communion is a stark change in doctrine not simply a matter of pastoral compassion. Most likely the plea of mercy to sinners will eventually lead to a change of doctrines.

The pope says at the beginning of the document that "no one can be condemned forever." The doctrine of hell has apparently been rescinded.

## THE NEW CATHOLIC TRUCE

By Ross Douthat

Roman Catholicism remains officially united. The church has a conservative wing, a liberal wing, and a low-grade civil war. But the church's left and right have found ways to coexist. That coexistence depends on a tension between doctrine and practice, in which the church's official teaching remains conservative even as the everyday life of Catholicism is shot through with disagreement, relativism, dissent.

Because the teaching is consistent, conservatives are reassured that the church is still essentially unchanging, still the faith of the church fathers, Nicea and Trent as well as Vatican II. At the same time, the flexibility and soft heterodoxy of many pastors and parishes and Catholic institutions enables liberal Catholics to feel reasonably at home while they wait for Rome to "evolve" in their direction.

Of course many Catholics have been dissatisfied with this arrangement. And from the outset of his pontificate, it was clear that Pope Francis was one of them, and that he was determined to renegotiate its terms – in liberal Catholicism's favor. The question wasn't just how far he would go in encouraging flexibility. It was how far he could go without hitting a kind of self-destruct button on his own authority, by seeming to change the church in ways that conservative Catholics deem impossible.

Now we have an answer of sorts. In his new letter on marriage and the family, the pope does not endorse a formal path to communion for the divorced and unmarried, which his allies pushed against conservative opposition at two consecutive synods in Rome, and which would have thrown Catholic doctrine on the indissolubility of marriage (and sexual ethics writ large) into flagrant self-contradiction. But what he does seem to encourage, in passages which are ambiguous sentence by sentence but clearer in their cumulative weight, is the existing practice in many places – the informal admission of remarried Catholics to communion by sympathetic priests.

This means that the truce is still in effect, but its terms have distinctly changed. There is still a formal teaching that remarriage with no annulment is adultery, that adultery is a mortal sin, that people who persist in mortal sins should not receive communion. And there is no *structure* or *system* in church life that contradicts any of this. Conservatives still have this much, and it's enough to stave off a sense of immediate theological crisis.

But there is also now a new papal teaching: a teaching *in favor of the truce itself*. That is, the post-1960s separation between doctrine and pastoral practice now has a papal imprimatur, rather than being a state of affairs that popes were merely tolerating for the sake of unity. Indeed, for Pope Francis that separation is clearly a hoped-for source of renewal, revival and revitalization, rather than something that renewal or revival might enable the church to gradually transcend.

Again, this is not the clear change of doctrine, the proof of concept for other changes, that many liberal bishops and cardinals sought. But it is an encouragement for innovation, on

the ground, for the *de facto* changes that more sophisticated liberal Catholics believe will eventually render certain uncomfortable doctrines as dead letters without the need for a formal repudiation from the top. This means that the new truce may be even shakier than the old one. In effectively licensing innovation rather than merely tolerating it, and in transforming the papacy's keenest defenders into wary critics, it promises to heighten the church's contradictions rather than contain them.

And while it does not undercut the pope's authority as directly as a starker change might have, it still carries a distinctive late-Marxist odor – a sense that the church's leadership is a little like the Soviet *nomenklatura*, bound to ideological precepts that they are no longer confident can truly work.

A slippage that follows from this lack of confidence is one of the most striking aspects of the pope's letter. What the church considers serious sin becomes mere "irregularity." What the church considers a commandment becomes a mere "ideal." What the church once stated authoritatively it now proffers tentatively in tones laced with self-effacement, self-critique. Francis doubtless intends this language as a bridge between the church's factions, just diplomatic enough for conservatives but perpetually open to more liberal interpretations. And such deliberate ambiguity does offer a center of sorts, for a deeply divided church. But not one, I fear, that's likely to permanently hold.

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## A NEW MORALITY

By James Carroll

"Joy of Love" is the pope's concluding exhortation after the Synod on the Family unfolded in the course of the past two years. Comparable in scope, compassion, and eloquent wisdom to last spring's climate-change document *Laudato si*, this new statement is, in effect, the Pope's summary and conclusion about the questions raised at the Synod, which found itself focused on whether divorced and remarried Catholics can receive Communion. Francis takes that up. He says, all but explicitly, yes they can. But it is how he does so that lends this declaration its revolutionary significance.

Formerly, in accordance with the Catholic doctrine of the "indissolubility" of marriage, the divorced and remarried were officially shunned. They remained in the pew while most others in the church went forward to Communion. But that shunning is history. "It is important that the divorced who have entered a new union should be made to feel part of the Church," Francis writes. How that is expressed in practice is to be determined, he writes, not by "a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases," but by "a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases."

The Pope—to the disappointment of many liberals, no doubt—is not replacing an old set of harsh and restrictive rules with a new set of flexible and merciful rules. Rules, actually, are not the point. It is true that this document does little explicitly to uproot the structures of misogyny and homophobia that have long corrupted the Catholic tradition, but it does give a fresh impetus to change on these issues. Francis's watchword is mercy, mercy not

first in alterations of doctrine but in the new way that Catholics are invited to think of doctrine. When human experience, with what the Pope calls its “immense variety of concrete situations,” is elevated over “general principles,” a revolution is implicit. “It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations.”

The pastoral solution lives in this realm of “particular situations,” where, as Francis insists, “constant love” must prevail over judgmentalism. Every situation is different, and a subtle moral discernment is required to see how general principles apply to it. For centuries, the assumption of the Catholic hierarchy was that lay people were not capable of such discernment, but, with Francis, that is no longer true. “The Joy of Love” is directly addressed to the laity, who are encouraged to pursue conscientious moral discernment by consulting not only pastors but one another. Who knows the ins and outs of married life better than married people?

Conservatives have long warned of the dangers involved in a forthright, public acknowledgment that moral complexity requires flexibility. Rules and doctrines, they worry, will be undermined if absolutist attitudes about their meaning are mitigated. The conservatives are right, and they will surely see this new exhortation as a further source of concern. Pope Francis’s emphasis on mercy toward the divorced and remarried doesn’t only mean that those people will more freely partake of Communion. It also means that the doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage, however much it is still held up as an ideal, will not grip the moral imagination of the Church as it once did.

Such a progression has already occurred in Catholic attitudes about contraception. Once the vast majority of the faithful took for granted their right and duty to weigh situation against principle—and decided, mostly, that the principle didn’t apply—it was only a matter of time before the hierarchy itself did the same. That is the significance of Pope Francis’s own conclusion, offered in February on his plane ride back from Mexico, that the Zika-virus pandemic requires a change in the Church’s policies on contraception. In that drastic situation, the principle of “*Humanae Vitae*” simply does not apply. Official Church teaching on birth control may never change, but its meaning will never be the same. Moral discernment belongs to the people.

The change that Francis has wrought on the Catholic imagination is one that I never imagined would come from the top, where order was taken to be holy. Better late than never. Pope Francis is calling many of us home, while sending no one away. “I understand those who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion,” he writes. “But I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a Church attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness.” The point, of course, is that the Church, too, is marked by human weakness, as this halting progress toward reform so clearly shows. But here, again, the goodness is what counts. Francis is inviting the Church to leave behind the tidy moralism of the pulpit and the sacristy in order to do “what good she can, even if in the process, her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street.”