Opinion



Cardinal Raymond Burke is pictured during a consistory at the Vatican June 28. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

August 21, 2017
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Cardinal Raymond Burke, patron of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, recently gave an interview to The Wanderer. In the recently published second of three excerpts, Burke reveals he has been thinking about issuing a "formal correction" to Pope Francis and provides an update of his rejection of *Amoris Laetitia*.

The patron and the paper seem to be cut out of the same ultra-conservative cloth, and as you read the transcript, you can see how the questions posed are of a sort that if they were uttered in a courtroom, opposing counsel could object that they are leading. Normally, an interviewee is attentive to such leading questions and begins to preface his replies with an acknowledgement that he comes at the issue differently, or doesn't entirely accept the premises contained in the question. Not Burke. He treats these leading questions like an antipasto and gobbles them up.

Here is the first question, which I print in full lest you think I am cropping to dramatize the point:

> When I last interviewed you for The Wanderer about a year and a half ago, you noted that "many good priests, even bishops talk to you about the difficulty of dealing with confusion when they present the Church's teaching." And that was before "Amoris Laetitia" was promulgated. The confusion has heightened as is clearly evidenced by the quote in Cardinal [Carlo] Caffarra's letter to the Holy Father that you referred to earlier: "What is sin in Poland is good in Germany, that what is prohibited in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia is permitted in Malta." In fact, it seems as if some interpretations are in direct opposition to what is taught in paragraph 1650 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In light of the

current situation, do you have any advice today for faithful bishops, priests, religious, and lay people who yearn for clarity?

You can read the cardinal's reply for yourself. Suffice it to say he does not disclose any evidence that he is wrestling with the Holy Father's call to consider the role of rules in the life of the church. It is all perfectly clear to Burke that the pope has sown confusion and that people are living in "desperation" and that all would be well if only everyone would commit the catechism to memory.

I will point out one thing that is missing from Burke's reply: He does not mention Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed, in his other answers there is a passing reference to the fact that the late Cardinal Joachim Meisner had "a great love of our Lord," one mention of "the teaching of Christ," and a double mention of God's mercy, but that's it. I always find it strange when a successor of the apostles does not find a way to work in at least a mention, and preferably to begin his answer, with something about Jesus, not his teaching, but his person. Unless the question is "fries or a salad with that?" bishops and pastors must start with the person of Jesus Christ.

When the interviewer inquires about the prospect of schism, Cardinal Burke starts by stating his opposition to schism: "People talk about a de facto schism. I am absolutely in opposition to any kind of formal schism — a schism can never be correct." Phew. Glad he is not planning to lead people into a new church and make himself pope!

Advertisement

Then, the other canonical foot fell: "People can, however, be living in a schismatic situation if the teaching of Christ has been abandoned," Burke said. "The more appropriate word would be the one Our Lady used in her Message of Fatima: apostasy. There can be apostasy within the Church and this, in fact, is what is going on. In connection with the apostasy, Our Lady also referred to the failure of pastors to bring the Church to unity." It seems to me that it is Burke and the other dubious cardinals who are sowing the seeds of disunity. The propositions on which *Amoris Laetitia* are built were passed overwhelmingly by the Synod of Bishops.

Burke's discussion of "formal correction" shows how ideology can infect an otherwise traditional intellectual disposition of the church. He notes that such a correction,

though rare and not used for many centuries, has an ancient pedigree. People who champion Burke's insubordination often point to Acts 9 when St. Paul challenges St. Peter. But Burke gives away his manipulative intent when he states, "It is done very simply by a formal declaration to which the Holy Father is obliged to respond." Obliged by whom? Having failed to get a response to their dubia, which Pope Francis was right to ignore, do Burke and the other cardinals who oppose the pope really think this other mechanism will work?

The phrase "constant teaching of the church" has been invoked by those who reject *Amoris Laetitia*, and Burke does so again here. Of course, he does not invoke it when discussing *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical on procreation which introduced a development in church teaching, one of which Burke approves, but which was not "the constant teaching of the church" at all. Further, the church's teaching on what does and does not constitute a valid marriage has most definitely developed through the centuries. As well, the other lung by which the apostolic church breathes, the Eastern Orthodox churches, have always held to a different discipline regarding remarriage than we in the West. To introduce a word like "apostasy" into this conversation is a great insult to our Orthodox brothers and sisters.

I do not know what can be done about Cardinal Burke. Stripping him of his red hat would only make him a martyr in the eyes of his fans. At the time he was appointed spiritual patron of the Knights of Malta I offered the warning that he would have plenty of time to prowl through the world seeking the ruin of Pope Francis. Better to have given him a desk job with a lot of paperwork like the Congregation for the Causes of Saints! The Holy Father should ignore him as should other prelates. They can leave it to us in the journalistic world to make sure there are readily available responses to his challenges on the internet so that souls are not led astray. And, we must pray for his conversion. With God, all things are possible, and only God would be able to change a heart so hardened as the one that beats inside the red robes worn by this canonical conundrum.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

Editor's note: Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest! Sign up to receive free newsletters, and we will notify you when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.