Vatican



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A few dozen Catholics have publicly accused Pope Francis of committing heresy, claiming in a 25-page letter issued Sept. 24 that the pontiff's 2016 apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* contradicts previous church teaching.

The signatories also claim that Francis has been swayed by "false understandings of divine revelation" and has shown an "unprecedented sympathy" for Martin Luther, the German priest and theologian whose criticisms of the Catholic church in 1517 launched the Protestant reformation.

But several prominent theologians and scholars said the accusations are marked by hypocrisy and represent a marginal fringe view among academics. They noted that the 62 signatories of the letter are mainly obscure figures, with some even listed with relatively minor descriptions such as "diocesan priest" or "religious."

"The first reaction I had after reading the document concerned the signatories," Richard Gaillardetz, a noted theologian at Boston College, told NCR. "The prominence given to the number of signatories ... masks the fact that these are really marginal figures."

Gaillardetz, a former president of the Catholic Theological Association of America, said that while the signatories have the right to put their views forward, "they need

to be acknowledged as the extreme and self-marginalized voices that they are."

Massimo Faggioli, a theologian and historian at Villanova University, noted that only one bishop joined the group: Bernard Fellay, who was unlawfully ordained a prelate in 1988 and leads the schismatic Society of St. Pius X. The signatory list, Faggioli said, has "no cardinal and no bishop, in a Catholic Church that has more than 200 cardinals and more than 5,000 bishops."

Organizers call the letter a "filial correction" of the pope. It carries the Latin title *Correctio filialis de haeresibus propagatis* ("A filial correction concerning the propagation of heresies").

The letter, delivered to the pope Aug. 11 but published online Sept. 24, is broken into two sections: a nine-page brief that lays out how the pontiff has allegedly committed seven heresies, followed by 16 pages of an "elucidation" to further explain "two general sources of error which appear to us to be fostering the heresies."

To support the claims of heresy, the letter writers cite at length from *Amoris Laetitia* and from public statements and interviews the pope has given since the document's release.

They particularly criticize the pope's praise of guidelines issued by a group of Argentine bishops in September 2016, which stated that the exhortation allowed divorced and remarried people to take communion privately, under certain circumstances.

The letter writers also criticize the pope's appointment of Cardinal Kevin Farrell as the head of the new Vatican dicastery for laity, family and life, citing an October 2016 interview with NCR in which Farrell said that *Amoris Laetitia* was "the Holy Spirit speaking to us."

Amoris Laetitia, known in English as "The Joy of Love," was written by Francis after the 2014 and 2015 Synods of Bishops. While the document does not make any outright changes to church teaching, it says that Catholic bishops and priests can no longer make blanket moral determinations about so-called "irregular" marital situations such as divorce and remarriage.

While Catholics who have been divorced and remarried without receiving an annulment have traditionally been barred from receiving Communion, *Amoris Laetitia* says priests should practice "pastoral discernment" of individual situations and says such discernment can "include the help of the sacraments."

Gaillardetz, who has written several books on the practice of authority in Catholicism, said the writers accusing Francis of heresy presuppose a "troubling" ecclesiology, or theology of the nature and structure of the church.

"Francis is not afraid to be challenged and he has shown a refreshing openness to debate and disagreement in the church," said Gaillardetz.

"However, with this document we do not find a group of theologians and clerics interested in humbly offering their views as part of the ongoing discernment of the church in communion with its leaders," he continued. "They seek to correct the pope out of a dangerous sense of their own certitude, a certitude apparently untroubled by the principled disagreement that so many others in the church have with their views."

Stephen Walford, a British Catholic author who has written several books on the papacy and the theology of the church, said the accusation of heresy "is based around claims the Holy Father has never made — lies essentially — and a massive dose of hypocrisy."

"The signatories also attack Pope Francis for his attitude to Martin Luther, and yet, their own judging of what is acceptable for a pope to teach is nothing short of Protestantism; it’s a DIY [do-it-yourself] Catholicism," said Walford, who is currently at work on a book about *Amoris Laetitia* and recently met with Francis at the Vatican.

"Anyone who spends just a short time on social media will be aware of the vitriol and judgmentalism aimed at those who are loyal to Pope Francis: Anger, arrogance, pride, ridicule and unkindness," Walford continued. "These are the fruits of the evil one, and they will never bring forth a restoration of a golden age that never existed."

The list of signatories of the accusation letter includes one former Vatican official: Ettore Gotti Tedeschi, a former president of the Institute for the Works of Religion, commonly known as the Vatican Bank. Tedeschi was ousted from his role after a

2012 vote of no-confidence by the institute's board of directors.

One retired U.S. prelate joined the group of signatories after the letter was made public: 94-year-old René Henry Gracida, who was bishop of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Florida, 1975-1983 and Corpus Christi, Texas, 1983-1997. Cardinal Raymond Burke, who was one of four cardinals who issued a critical set of questions known as "dubia" to Francis in September 2016, has not signed the letter.

The signatories tell the pope they are writing to him "with profound grief, but moved by fidelity to our Lord Jesus Christ." After giving their list of the seven supposed heresies, they also ask that he might grant them his apostolic blessing.

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