Opinion
NCR Voices



Pope Francis listens during the opening session of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Oct. 4. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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No one knows for sure why Pope Francis chose to publish his responses to the *dubia* presented by five intransigent cardinals. My first thought was: Don't swing at pitches in the dirt. And, it is tempting to observe that these dubious cardinals simply had it coming.

Coming on the eve of the opening of the synod, some will complain that Francis is putting his thumb on the scales of discussions before they happen. Robert Royal, at The Catholic Thing, already suggested the responses show the synodal game is rigged. But the disingenuousness of the questions themselves shows that it was the cardinals who were trying to foreclose discussion before it began.

The responses were brilliantly done. So, for example, on the question of whether or not the Catholic Church can bless same-sex couples, the pope first explained, "The Church has a very clear understanding of marriage: an exclusive, stable, and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to procreation. Only this union can be called 'marriage.' Other forms of union realize it only in 'a partial and analogous way' (*Amoris Laetitia* 292), so they cannot be strictly called 'marriage.' "

He continued, "It is not just a matter of names, but the reality we call marriage has a unique essential constitution that requires an exclusive name, not applicable to other realities. It is undoubtedly much more than a mere 'ideal.' " Any idea that the pope is simply engaged in an effort to overturn the teachings of the church willy-nilly can be set aside.

That is not the end of the story, as it is for the dubious cardinals. Francis adds: "When a blessing is requested, it is expressing a plea to God for help, a supplication to live better, a trust in a Father who can help us live better." I cannot think of anyone who should be turned away if this is their intent and Francis, being a pastor at heart, knows that.

There is something else going on here. The dubious cardinals seem to forget, and Francis reminds them, that the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, did not suggest revelation exists to achieve some

degree of self-satisfaction among the doctors of the law. Revelation is given "for the salvation of all nations" (*Dei Verbum*, Paragraph 7). The dubious cardinals think conversion happens before one gets to the church door, once and for all. Francis, a pastor, knows that conversion never ends, that those who have crossed the threshold and those far from the doors of the church, are all in need of conversion. Christ died once and for all. Our conversion to the divine will is ongoing.

What is most striking about the responses is the difference in approach from that found in the original *dubia*. "The complex issues that the 'Dubia Cardinals' raise can only be answered with the pastoral type of response that Pope Francis gave," Sacred Heart University professor Michelle Loris told me in an email. "His method of response resonates with the way Jesus often responded to those who would try to trick and trap him — challenging his accusers to go more deeply into their heart and faith."

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Boston College professor Cathleen Kaveny had a different take on pope's responses to the *dubia*. She suggested that rather than giving a different answer to the issue of same-sex relationships, Pope Francis is changing the question. Kaveny drew an analogy from the mid-20th century debate about religious liberty. "The traditional question was, 'How can we endorse religious liberty for false religions, since the Church has always taught that error has no rights?' But Jesuit Fr. John Courtney Murray and others framed the question differently," Kaveny told me. "Those advocating for change said, 'We are not endorsing false religions. We are saying that rights are inherent in persons not propositions, so the proper question is what we need to do to respect the dignity of the human person as a being who has the duty to search for the truth.' "

"I think Pope Francis is saying: 'The proper question is not whether we are endorsing sexual activity between persons of the same sex. It is what do we need to do to respect the dignity of LGBTQ persons, many of whom seek to live lives of love and responsibility in and through their partnerships?' " Kaveny is going a step further than the pope did, but her framing could help the debate get past the often "my way or the highway" approach to neuralgic issues our fraught, culture war zeitgeist makes most prominent.

This was not the first time cardinals resistant to Francis' approach have filed *dubia* with the Holy See. After the twin synods on the family, Francis issued his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* and four cardinals issued five *dubia* questioning what the pope had written. Two of the four, American Cardinal Raymond Burke and German Cardinal Walter Brandmüller, are signatories this time, too. Then, the pope did not reply at all.

Theologian Dan Rober, who also teaches at Sacred Heart, told me that when Francis declined to publicly respond to the cardinals' *dubia* after *Amoris Laetitia*, the *dubia* were presented "after a synod had already concluded and were a response to the post-synodal exhortation. Refusing to reply let *Amoris* speak for itself including in areas those Cardinals may have felt were too ambiguous or otherwise problematic."

Why, then, did the pope respond this time? The decision by the dubious cardinals to publish their queries also mentioned that the pope responded and they found his responses unsatisfactory, so perhaps he just wanted to clear the air. No one can really "force his hand" as it were.

Whatever his reason, there is nothing in the responses that forecloses the discussions underway in the St. Pope Paul VI Hall this month. The synod is free to discuss these, and other, issues as they wish. Any conclusions the synod reaches will likely disappoint partisans on all sides, but the synod is not really about achieving a particular outcome on any given issue. It is about building up the unity of the church by focusing on mission, participation and communion.