



A journal for restless minds

ASKING FOR CLARITY

A disconcerting silence

LET YOUR ACTIONS SPEAK

Words are not enough

DEACON'S DINER

Food for a restless mind

Colloquī is a Deacon's Corner weekly journal. Its mission and purpose: to encourage serious discussion, to promote reasoned debate, and to provide serious content for those who hope to find their own pathway to God.

Each week Colloquī will contain articles on theology, philosophy, faith, religion, Catholicism, and much more.

Be forewarned! Articles may and often will contain fuel for controversy, but always with the express intent to seek the Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

Asking For Clarity

A disconcerting silence

There has been a disconcerting silence from the Vatican these past two years, despite "six major initiatives in which both clergy and laity have expressed concerns about the Pope's teaching, particularly emanating from *Amoris Laetitia*. Despite the repeated pleas and warnings of chaos and confusion, Francis has refused to respond or acknowledge the initiatives."¹

There are and have been a plethora of reports on this silence, including this past week in our local newspaper. What has been the thrust of most of the reporting has been to cast a pall on those who have publicly questioned the Pope as a small group of fringe radicals within the Church who are out to get the pope at all costs.

On September 26th, Father Dwight Longenecker, who says of himself: "I'm a former Evangelical, then an Anglican priest, now a Catholic priest,"² wrote an interesting and well-considered article, "Why

Doesn't the Pope Answer His Critics?" His objective thoughts and reasoned comments—in my humble opinion—bear reading. Rather than interpret, parse, and rephrase his words, I will let Father Longenecker speak for himself:



This week's big Catholic news is the release of a "filial correction" of Pope Francis by a group of theologians and church laymen. ...



This is the sixth major initiative in which both clergy and laity have expressed concerns about the Pope's teaching, particularly emanating from

Amoris Laetitia. Despite the repeated pleas and warnings of chaos and confusion, Francis has refused to respond or acknowledge the initiatives which are as follows, in chronological order:

In September 2015, just ahead of the second Synod on the Family, a petition of nearly 800,000 signatures from around the world including 202 prelates was

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

Let Your Actions Speak

Words are not enough

This parable, for most of us, has a familiar ring to it. At some point in our lives, we can usually recall saying one thing and doing another. Most, I imagine, have been like the son who said yes but then refused to act upon their assent; fewer are like the one who said no but then acted to the contrary.

I still vividly recall a moment in my life when I said yes, but acted contrary to my response. When I was nine or ten years old, we had a neighbor, a wonderful lady, originally from Spain, who was both generous and kind to everyone. On Easter Sunday, she set a large basket full of candies on her front porch with a small sign that read, "Please, take all you want." Being the literal-minded person that I was, I proceeded to fill every pocket, my shirt, my mouth, and both hands with candy.

My parents naturally inquired where I had obtained such a stash of sweet deliciousness, to which I honestly replied, "Mrs. M. said to take all we wanted." Naturally, and quite rightly, my parents saw things quite differently to my way of thinking and told me, quite emphatically, to take it all back.

After no small amount of arguing on my part, I finally acquiesced and agreed to return the candy. Of course, I had no true intention of doing so, and as soon as I walked out the door and out of their sight—ostensibly on my way to return those ill-gotten goods—I surreptitiously stashed the

candy behind a bush where I could later reclaim my booty.

Let us be completely honest with ourselves. Both of the sons in the parable represent each and every one of us at some point in our lives. We have all promised to do something and then not followed through with our promise; we have all refused to do something and then ended up doing it anyway; resolving to give up some bad habit or to adopt a good one—and failing on both accounts.



Pope Paul VI wrote in a letter on the eightieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, "Let each one examine himself, to see what he has done up to now, and what he ought to do. It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustice and utter prophetic denunciations; these words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier awareness of personal responsibility and by effective action. It is too easy to throw back on others responsibility for injustice, if at the same time one does not realize how each one shares in it personally, and how personal conversion is needed first. This basic humility will rid action of all inflexibility and sectarianism, it will also avoid discouragement in the face of a task which seems limitless in size."¹

Jesus asks us, "Which of the two did his father's will?" The answer is obvious: the one who refused but then did as he was asked. His immediate refusal was of little note, for he subsequently did the will of his father. Obedience reveals where our heart is; obedience, or disobedience, reveals the direction the heart is moving. "Obedience is never neutral, for to not obey God is to disobey his will. Inaction to God's known will is simply a passive form of rebellion, but rebellion none-the-less." Our actions truly do speak louder than our words.

"Whenever I take the opportunity to actively love God in personal obedience, I end up sensing a new tenderness in my heart toward Him and a stronger resolve to obey again next time. Obedience is not an end, but a means—a means to express our love to God, and a means to increase our love for God. It is a catalyst in the process of loving God and becoming more like Jesus."²

Many of us harbor the notion that faith and religion are roughly synonymous, but they are not at all the same. Religion must be animated by faith; faith must be lived out in the context of religion. Both are essential and related; one without the other is defective.

The fault Jesus found with the chief priests and the elders of the people was they had religion without faith. Religion without true faith is all too common among us. For example, some people believe their mere acceptance into a religious group and outward observance of ritual are all that is required to achieve salvation.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

Often referred to as “*the hatched, matched, and dispatched Catholic*”—that is someone who identifies as Catholic, is baptized, feels the need to be married in the church, wants to be buried in the church, and goes to church at Christmas and perhaps at Easter—but that is about all.

God demands more than just a “Yes,” more than mere words. God calls us to a living faith where we actively engage in a living relationship with him.

Good intentions are never enough. And promises don't count unless they are actually performed. Our actions speak; words are but whispers of hope. The religious and civil leaders in Jesus' time spoke a lot about God and, in particular, how God was to be served by a strict observance of the Law. But they did not have the spirit of love, compassion, caring and forgiveness for the weak and vulnerable. They heard the teaching of Jesus but made no effort to carry it out. They had a long tradition of following God's Law but when they encountered Jesus, the Son of God, they refused to listen.

Today's readings encourage us to learn to accept and grow beyond our shortcomings. They command humility when we don't receive the credit we believe we deserve; they warn against conceit. The next time you look in a mirror, say to the person looking back at you, “*You are the center of the universe.*” Does that make you feel uncomfortable? It should.

They encourage us to level ourselves with others, appreciating their perspectives to better understand their issues and attain a level of compassion not otherwise possible. How much holier would we be if we could consistently and humbly regard others as we do ourselves.

Jesus told the chief priests and elders that “*tax collectors and the prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God before you.*” They certainly were not keeping God's Law. They had said “No” to his commandments many times. But when they met Jesus, they experienced a radical transformation in their lives. They listened and they responded. Many of the dregs of society heard the message and changed their lives. They became Christians in action as well as in word.

Two messages can be drawn out from this: one, we ought never be complacent in our relationship with God. It is too easy for any of us at any time to find ourselves falling away from our commitment to Jesus and to his Gospel. And two, God always accepts us where we are. If we are in union with him, things are well; if we have, by our own choice, become separated from him, he accepts that too. His love and his grace are always available but they can be rejected and spurned. And we can “*die in our sin.*”

No matter how far we have strayed from God, no matter how sinful we have become, it is never too late to turn back and we can be absolutely sure that a warm, no-questions-asked welcome will be waiting for us.

But everything comes back to saying “Yes” or “No” to God. Yet, these are not words we say but what we do. A “Yes” that is said but is not done is only an evasion. We cannot just talk the talk, we must walk the talk.

We must decide to obey God all the time in every way. Partial obedience is a euphemism for disobedience. No matter how weak you have been for years, God will always give you the grace to obey. God offers each of us the greatest treasure possible—unending peace, joy, happiness, and life with him in his kingdom. We can lose that treasure if we say no and refuse the grace God offers us to follow in his way of truth and righteousness. We will be rewarded when we say yes through our actions. I pray today that we all will walk the talk towards God's kingdom.

Amen.

Homily for the
Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
Ezekiel 18:25-28
Philippians 12:1-11
Matthew 21:28-32

1. Pope Paul VI, *Octagesimo Adveniens*, 1971, §48. *Octagesima adveniens* (The eightieth anniversary) is the incipit of the May 14, 1971 Apostolic Letter addressed by Pope Paul VI to Cardinal Maurice Roy, president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity and of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, on the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.
2. Martha Thatcher, *The Freedom of Obedience: Choosing the way of true liberation*, Navpress Publishing Group, 1987.

presented to Pope Francis, calling on him to issue words of clarity on the Church's teaching on marriage and family. The signatories, from 178 countries, expressed concern about "widespread confusion" arising from the possibility that "a breach" had been opened within the Church at the previous synod.

In July 2016, a group of 45 Catholic scholars, prelates and clergy sent an appeal to the College of Cardinals asking that they petition Pope Francis to "repudiate" what they saw as "erroneous propositions" contained in *Amoris Laetitia*. They said the apostolic exhortation contains "a number of statements that can be understood in a sense that is contrary to Catholic faith and morals."

On Sept. 19, 2016, four cardinals — Carlo Caffarra, Walter Brandmüller, Raymond Burke, and Joachim Meisner — presented the Pope with *dubia*, five questions on disputed passages of *Amoris Laetitia* with the aim of obtaining clarification and resolving confusion over diverse interpretations of the controversial passages among various bishops and episcopal conferences. The Pope did not acknowledge the *dubia*, nor did he respond to the cardinals' request for an audience in May.

In February this year, confraternities representing thousands of priests worldwide issued a statement saying a clarification of *Amoris Laetitia* was "clearly needed" in the wake of "widespread" differing interpretations of the apostolic exhortation. They also thanked the four cardinals for submitting the *dubia*.

However, I think people need to understand some of the underlying currents in this discussion. The elephant in the nave is the yawning gap between the views of contemporary theologians and ordinary Catholics.

People in the pew probably do not know that many theologians and clergy are critical of what they call "propositional faith." Propositional faith is a faith that is grounded in rational statements and definitions. It is, if you like a religion based in an authoritative book, a creed, a catechism, a dogmatic systematic theology and, by extension a defined religious law. Those who favor a propositional faith like certainty and clarity.

Critics of propositional faith believe that, at best, the propositions are simply a framework or structure of belief, and that the real experience is far more complicated, but also far more exciting and real. They criticize those who like a propositional faith as being rigid, legalistic or Pharisaical. The critics of propositional faith like to emphasize the more subjective "encounter with Christ." They advocate getting away from all the debates about doctrine or canon law, rolling up one's sleeves and getting busy doing God's work in the world.

Critics of propositional faith also believe that it is divisive. If "the encounter with Christ" is emphasized rather than propositional formulas of doctrine and morals, we will connect better with non-Catholic Christians and people of faith and goodwill who are outside the boundaries of Christian belief. In other words, "doctrine is divisive" but if we focus on

religious experience we are more likely to find common ground.

They also feel that a "propositional faith" is, by its nature, bound to the historical and philosophical constructs of the time and culture in which the propositions were asserted. So, the theology of Thomas Aquinas (they would argue) was fine for Europe of the thirteenth century, but it is rather clunky for the fast moving, fast changing global culture of the twenty first century. A faith that is not so propositional is more adaptable and fluid.

In reading the gospel it is difficult not to sympathize with those who criticize "propositional faith." After all, Jesus' main opponents were the religious people who were indeed legalistic, judgmental and bound to their laws and man made traditions. Jesus, on the other hand, waded in and "made a mess" to use Francis' terminology. He defied the legalistic technicalities, met people where they were and brought healing, compassion and forgiveness.

Why does Pope Francis not answer his critics? I believe it is because he is not in favor of "propositional faith". He wants Catholics to move beyond the technicalities, the details of doctrine and the constrictions of canon law to live out a Catholic life more like Jesus'—allowing for the complications and ambiguities of real life, meeting real people who face difficult decisions and are trying to be close to God while tiptoeing through the legalities and rules of being a Catholic Christian.

In other words, he does not answer his critics because he does not wish to play their game. He does not wish to be drawn into their legalistic arguments, but instead wants to continue to challenge them. That is why he lets his ambiguous statements stand without further clarification. That is why he does not answer the “*corrections*” he receives. I expect he believes the teaching of the church is clear. He has not contradicted it, so there is no further need for discussion and debate.

Instead he wants us to live with the ambiguities and get on with the complicated business of bringing Jesus to people who are tied up in the sometimes messy business of life.

As a pastor, I understand this and am sympathetic to what I believe Pope Francis is trying to do.

However, there is always the other side of the argument and balance is a good thing, and a good pastor knows that, because of their personality type, certain of his flock are going to need certainty, re-assurance and clarity of teaching. Instead of marginalizing them, he will provide clarity of teaching while still challenging them not to rely on propositional statements alone or to take refuge in the seeming security of doctrinal statements and “*clear moral teaching.*”

While it is important for the Pope to exhibit Jesus’ way of ministering in the world, it is also part of the Pope’s job to define and defend the faith, and for Catholics part of this experience of encountering Christ is a clear and un-

ambiguous definition of historic faith and morals.

Pope Francis is fond of criticizing the Catholics who are rigid and bound by a legalistic approach, but in my experience these sorts of Catholics are few and far between. The vast majority of Catholics I work with are ordinary folks who are not stupid even if they are not theologically educated. They understand the need for clear teaching in doctrine and morals, but they also understand that life is complicated and the work of the church is to minister Christ’s love in complex situations.

In fact, rather than the problem being an excess of legalistic, propositionally bound Catholics, in the USA the Catholic Church is besieged with the opposite problem. The majority of Catholics are poorly catechized and far from being bound by doctrine and moral teachings they are mostly ignorant of these things and what doctrine and moral teachings they have absorbed are largely ignored.

My own take on this, therefore, is that I understand the need for the “*encounter with Christ*” as opposed to a faith that is merely propositional, but I also believe that without a clear affirmation of the propositions of our faith, the “*encounter with Christ*” becomes no more than a subjective religious experience.

Both are needed, and an analogy I have often used is that of the vine and the trellis.

The vine is what matters. It is a living, growing, fruitful gift. A vine needs a trellis to grow and reach the sun and bear good fruit.

The vine is the faith—the encounter with Christ—the real experience and adventure of living the Christian life. The trellis is the doctrinal and moral propositions that support the vine, but the trellis, being a dead thing needs constant maintenance and repair if it is to support the vine.

Deacon’s Diner

Food for a restless mind

For those restless minds that hunger and thirst for more. Each week this space will offer a menu of interesting and provocative titles, written by Catholic authors, in addition to those referenced in the articles, for you to feed your restless mind.

BOOKS

On Conscience

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

Ignatius Press

2007, 82 pages.

How the West Really Lost God

Mary Eberstadt

Templeton Press

June 9, 2012, 268 pages.

Strangers in a Strange Land

Charles J. Chaput

Henry Holt and Co.

February 21, 2017, 288 pages.

PERIODICALS

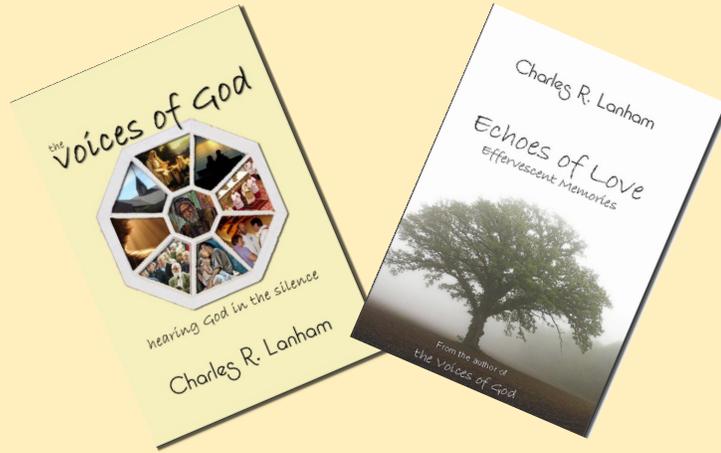
First Things

Institute on Religion and Public Life

Editor: R. R. Reno

Ten Issues per year.

www.firstthings.com



Books are available on **Amazon.com** or from the author's web site at:

deaconscorner.org

Deacon Chuck Lanham is an author, columnist, speaker, and a servant of God.

He is the author of **The Voices of God: Hearing God in the Silence**, **Echoes of Love: Effervescent Memories** and is currently writing his third book **Without God: Finding God in a Godless World**.

Each issue of **Colloquī** can be viewed or downloaded from

<http://deaconscorner.org>.

Deacon Chuck can be contacted thru email at

deacon.chuck@deaconscorner.org

Colloquī is a weekly publication of **Deacon's Corner Publishing**.

Copyright © 2016 by **Deacon's Corner Publishing**. All rights reserved.

Deacon's Corner Publishing

4742 Cougar Creek Trail

Reno, Nevada 89519