

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

although it is not always prudent for me to answer the questions addressed directly to me, and it would be impossible to answer them all, in this case it seemed appropriate to do so because of the proximity of the Synod.

### **Question 1**

- a) The answer depends on the meaning you give to the word "reinterpret". If it is understood as "to interpret better" the expression is valid. In this sense, the Second Vatican Council affirmed that it is necessary that with the work of exegetes - I would add that of theologians - "the judgment of the Church should *mature*" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 12).
- b) Therefore, while it is true that divine Revelation is immutable and always binding, the Church must be humble and recognize that she never exhausts its unfathomable richness and needs to grow in her *understanding*.
- c) Consequently, she also matures in the understanding of what she herself has affirmed in her Magisterium.
- d) Cultural changes and the new challenges of history do not modify Revelation, but they can stimulate us to make more explicit some aspects of its overflowing richness, which always offers more.
- e) It is inevitable that this may lead to a better *expression* of some past statements of the Magisterium, and indeed it has been the case throughout history.
- f) On the other hand, it is true that the Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but it is also true that both the texts of Scripture and the testimonies of Tradition need an interpretation that makes it possible to distinguish their substance.

perennial cultural conditioning. It is evident, for example, in biblical texts (such as Ex 21:20-21) and in some magisterial interventions that tolerated slavery (cf. Nicholas V, Bull *Dum Diversas*, 1452). This is not a minor issue given its intimate connection with the perennial truth of the inalienable dignity of the human person. These texts are in need of interpretation. The same is true for some New Testament considerations on women (1 Cor 11:3-10; 1 Tim 2:11-14) and for other texts of Scripture and testimonies of Tradition that cannot be materially repeated today.

g) It is important to emphasize that what cannot change is what has been revealed "for the *salvation* of all" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 7). For this reason the Church must constantly discern between what is essential for salvation and what is secondary or less directly connected with this goal. In this regard, I would like to recall what St. Thomas Aquinas affirmed: "the more one descends to the particular, the more indeterminacy increases" (*Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 94, art. 4).

h) Finally, a single formulation of a truth can never be adequately understood if it is presented in isolation, *isolated* from the rich and harmonious context of the whole of Revelation. The "hierarchy of truths" also implies situating each of them in adequate connection with the more central truths and with the totality of the Church's teaching. This can finally give rise to different ways of expounding the same doctrine, although "to those who dream of a monolithic doctrine defended by all without nuance, this may seem an imperfect dispersion. But the reality is that this variety helps the various aspects of the inexhaustible richness of the Gospel to be better manifested and developed" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 49). Each theological line has its risks but also its opportunities.

## Question 2

a) The Church has a very clear conception of marriage: an exclusive, stable and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the begetting of children. Only this union is called "marriage. Other forms of union are only "partial and analogous" (*Amoris laetitia* 292), and therefore cannot strictly be called "marriage".

b) It is not a mere question of names, but the reality we call marriage has a unique essential constitution that demands an exclusive name, not applicable to other realities. It is certainly much more than a mere "ideal".

c) For this reason the Church avoids any kind of rite or sacramental that could contradict this conviction and give the impression that something that is not marriage is recognized as marriage.

d) Nevertheless, in our dealings with people, we must not lose the pastoral charity that must permeate all our decisions and attitudes. The defense of objective truth is not the only expression of this charity, which is also made up of kindness, patience, understanding, tenderness and encouragement. Therefore, we cannot become judges who only deny, reject and exclude.

e) For this reason, pastoral prudence must adequately discern whether there are forms of blessing, requested by one or more persons, that do not transmit a mistaken conception of marriage. Because when a blessing is requested, it is expressing a request for help from God, a plea to be able to live better, a trust in a Father who can help us to live better.

f) On the other hand, although there are situations that from an objective point of view are not morally acceptable, pastoral charity itself demands that we do not simply treat others as "sinners" whose guilt or responsibility may be due to their own fault.

attenuated by various factors that influence subjective imputability (cf. St. John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 17).

g) Decisions which, in certain circumstances, can form part of pastoral prudence, should not necessarily become a norm. That is to say, it is not appropriate for a Diocese, an Episcopal Conference or any other ecclesial structure to constantly and in an official manner enable procedures or rites for all kinds of matters, since everything "that which is part of a practical discernment in a particular situation cannot be elevated to the category of a norm", because this "would give rise to an unbearable casuistry" (*Amoris laetitia* 304). Canon Law should not and cannot cover everything, nor should the Episcopal Conferences claim to do so with their various documents and protocols, because the life of the Church runs through many channels in addition to the normative ones.

### Question 3

a) Although you recognize that the supreme and full authority of the Church is exercised either by the Pope because of his office or by the college of bishops together with its head, the Roman Pontiff (cf. Conc. Ecumen. Vat. II, Const. dogm. *Umen gentium*, 22), nevertheless with these *dubia* you yourselves manifest your need to participate, to give your opinion freely and to collaborate, and thus you are claiming some form of "synodality" in the exercise of my ministry.

b) The Church is a "mystery of missionary communion", but this communion is not only affective or ethereal, but necessarily implies real participation: that not only the hierarchy but *all the People of God* in different ways and at different levels can make their voices heard and feel part of the Church's journey. In this sense we can say that synodality, as a style and dynamism, is an essential dimension of the life of the Church. On this point, St. John Paul II has said very beautiful things in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*.

c) It is quite another thing to sacralize or impose a particular synodal methodology that pleases one group, to make it the norm and obligatory channel for all, because this would only lead to "freezing" the synodal journey, ignoring the diverse characteristics of the different particular Churches and the varied richness of the universal Church.

#### Question 4

a) "The common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood differ essentially" (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 10). It is not convenient to maintain a difference of degree that implies considering the common priesthood of the faithful as something of "second category" or of lesser value ("a lower degree"). Both forms of priesthood enlighten and sustain each other.

b) When St. John Paul II taught that it is necessary to affirm "definitively" the impossibility of conferring priestly ordination on women, he was in no way belittling women and giving supreme power to men. St. John Paul II also affirmed other things. For example, that when we speak of priestly power "we are in the realm of *function*, not *dignity* or holiness" (St. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 51). These are words that we have not sufficiently embraced. He also clearly maintained that while the priest alone presides at the Eucharist, the tasks "*do not give rise to superiority* of one over the other" (St. John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, note 190; cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration inter */risi9n/ores*, VI). He also affirmed that if the priestly function is "hierarchical", it should not be understood as a form of domination, but "is *totally* ordered to the holiness of the members of Christ" (St. John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, 27). If this is not understood and the practical consequences of these distinctions are not drawn, it will be difficult to accept that the priesthood is reserved only to men and we will not be able to recognize the rights of women or the need for them to participate, in various ways, in the leadership of the Church.

c) On the other hand, to be rigorous, let us acknowledge that a clear and authoritative doctrine has not yet been exhaustively developed about the exact nature of

a "definitive statement". It is not a dogmatic definition, and yet it is to be observed by all. No one can publicly contradict it and yet it can be the subject of study, as is the case with the validity of ordinations in the Anglican Communion.

## Question 5

a) Repentance is necessary for the validity of sacramental absolution, and implies the intention not to sin. But there is no mathematics here and once again I must remind you that the confessional is not a customs house. We are not owners, but humble stewards of the Sacraments that nourish the faithful, because these gifts of the Lord, more than relics to be guarded, are aids of the Holy Spirit for people's lives.

b) There are many ways to express repentance. Often, in people who have a very wounded self-esteem, pleading guilty is a cruel torture, but the mere fact of approaching confession is a symbolic expression of repentance and seeking divine help.

c) I would also like to recall that "sometimes it is very difficult for us to make room in pastoral work for the unconditional love of God" (*Amoris laetitia* 311), but we must learn to do so. Following St. John Paul II, I maintain that we should not demand from the faithful too precise and sure resolutions of amendment, which in the end end end up being abstract or even egotistical, but that even the foreseeability of a new fall "does not prejudice the authenticity of the resolution" (St. John Paul II, *Letter to Card. William W. Baum and the participants in the annual course of the Apostolic Penitentiary*, 22 March 1996, 5).

d) Finally, it should be clear that all the conditions that are usually placed on confession are generally not applicable when the person is in a situation of agony, or with very limited mental and psychic capacities.