

THE ISSUE

Criticising the Pope is lawful, here's how

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"No one can judge me, not even you", goes the saying. But not even the pope can make this claim. In fact, what divides the Church today is not so much doctrinal error, but criticism of the Pope. On the one hand there are those who consider it unthinkable, unacceptable to criticise the Pope, and on the other those who take the complete opposite view. The issue of whether or not it is permissible to criticise the Pope is the

most accidental cause of division within the Church, it is the real thorn in the side of ecclesial unity.

This is why people abandon parishes and associations, why they choose to attend Sunday Mass in another church, why they no longer read certain newspapers or websites, why rifts are created within families, why vicious posts are made on social media. This leads to a dichotomous approach to the problem: for or against the Pope. But the criterion of supporters is wrong, because the point is another and starts from two questions: is it licit to criticise the Pope? And, if so, on which occasion can he be criticised?

Regarding the first question, criticising the Pope is licit from a moral point of view for one very simple reason: he too can make mistakes. If we want to respect the principle of non-contradiction, we must necessarily conclude that outside of Petrine infallibility there is Petrine fallibility. It is the dogmatic constitution *Pastor aeternus* itself that confirms this, albeit indirectly: "We [...] proclaim and define a dogma revealed by God that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks ex cathedra, that is, when he exercises his supreme office of Pastor and Doctor of all Christians, and by virtue of his supreme apostolic power defines a doctrine concerning faith and morals [...] enjoys that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to be equipped in defining doctrine concerning faith and morals". Therefore, when he does not speak ex cathedra the Pope is fallible. Of course, this does not mean that everything that falls under this umbrella is equally fallible, i.e. everything can be criticised. If a pope, not executing his own infallibility, affirms that Jesus Christ is God, he is merely reaffirming, without the formal garb of infallibility, a Catholic dogma. If, on the other hand, he asserts that all migrants should be indiscriminately welcomed, the assertion, being about a way of doing good, is inherently questionable.

Even the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the *Illustrative Doctrinal Note of the concluding formula of the Professio fidei, as already mentioned in these columns recently*, clarified that not all the pope's pronouncements are infallible. And Pope Francis has never executed his own infallibility in his pronouncements. It follows that the Pope can be criticised. The Magisterium itself permits this. Lumen Gentium: "According to the knowledge, competence, and prestige they enjoy, [the laity] have the faculty, indeed sometimes even the duty, to make known their opinion on matters concerning the good of the Church. If necessary, they should do so through the bodies established for this purpose by the Church, and always with truth, fortitude, and prudence, with respect and charity towards those who, by reason of their sacred office, represent Christ" (37).

Similarly, the Code of Canon Law thus regulates: "In a manner proportionate to the knowledge, competence, and prestige they enjoy, they [the faithful] have the right, and indeed sometimes even the duty, to manifest to the sacred Pastors their thoughts on what concerns the good of the Church; and to make them known to the other faithful, without prejudice to the integrity of faith and morals and respect for the Pastors, bearing in mind the common good and the dignity of persons" (Canon 212, §3). Francis himself is on the same wavelength when he indicates *parousia* as a method of criticism.

Like any action that is good in itself, the choice to criticise must, however, respect the principle of proportion or efficacy. Here are the references to prudence, respect, charity, integrity of faith and morals, common utility, and the dignity of persons. In short, if criticism causes more harm than good, silence is better. Let us exemplify. We are at dinner with friends who are almost *de facto* atheists. The discourse falls on the current pope. I will avoid criticising him so as not to scandalise these little ones in the faith. Second scenario: I am having dinner with a parish priest and he intends to bless gay couples "because the Pope asks for it". It is legitimate and right to criticise the pope's choice. Even in the first example, if I were asked for an opinion on blessings, I could not avoid a clear censorious judgement. Precisely because the faith of my interlocutors, who are already shaky on moral issues, depends on it. More generally, we must observe that the quantity and quality of Francis's heterodox utterances has forced quite a few to publicly remind themselves of sound doctrine precisely in order to avoid the misleading of many. In short, a state of necessity has driven many to criticism, because the more serious the attack on faith, the greater the defensive response must be.

The lawfulness of criticising the Pope is attested by Revelation and history:

Paul with Peter. "When Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him openly because he was evidently wrong" (Gal 2:11). Pope Honorius **was excommunicated**, albeit posthumously. This happened and this can still happen because the Pope is the guardian of the truth, he is not the truth. Christ alone is truth, not his vicar on earth. Therefore the Pope is, like all of us, subject to the *lex aeterna* in its two declinations of *lex divina positiva* and *lex naturalis*. He too is hierarchically inferior to the supreme law of the Church: *salus animarum* (click [here](#) and [here](#)).

Having ascertained that the pope is also fallible and therefore criticisable, let us move on to the second question mentioned earlier: when can he be criticised? When, in accordance with the principle of efficacy mentioned earlier, his words or actions are clearly contrary to the Church's long-standing doctrine. For example: is homosexuality

condemned by the Church? Yes. Are blessings to homosexual couples therefore permissible? No. Therefore the Pope should not have approved gay blessings. There is nothing more to add.

Having said all this, these are the objections. The first: this criticism undermines the unity of the Church. Answer: the unity of the Church is a good, but it is not the supreme good and there are other more important goods, for example the truth. Or do we all prefer to keep silent and thus endorse error so as not to be divided? Jesus also spoke plainly and, as the Gospel of John in chapter 6 attests, the result was that, on one occasion, a good portion of his followers left. Should he have kept silent? If your daughter was forced into prostitution by one of your family members, would you at least not go and reproach them? Only a fool would argue that this splits the family in two and therefore silence would be preferable. Today, there are those who prostitute the Church and its doctrine: if defending them leads to divisions, this is a price that is licit and even proper to pay, as things stand.

Second objection: Pope Francis has never actually made any judgments contrary to sound doctrine. For example, in the case of gay blessings, when the Pope, interviewed on Italian TV by Fabio Fazio, said that "the Lord blesses everyone", he did not say that gay couples can be blessed. On the possibility for remarried divorcees, he said that *the doctrine on marriage remains unchanged*. On the fact that some good conduct is impossible for some, Francis *once said* that "everything is possible for faith". On the prohibition of proselytising, the Pope entertained us for a long time with one of his catechesis whose title already explains everything: *The passion for evangelisation: the believer's apostolic zeal*. In reality, we reply, it is a 'Jesuitical' tactic. Say everything and the opposite of everything. Promote heresy and then immediately recuse it. In this way, as the Pope has repeatedly admitted, processes are triggered: in the confusion, evil creeps forward. And furthermore, one can always appeal to orthodox statements to get away with it, fishing through the jumble of contradictory statements to find one that fits the case. It is a cunning ploy. But God won't be fooled.