

LARGER FEARS FUEL CARDINALS' DIVORCE BEEF

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IN THE YEARS after the Second Vatican Council many theologians gave public lectures to Melbourne audiences on renewal. Jesuit moral theologian Arnie Hogan encouraged the move from a command and control approach to Christian living, to an approach based on personal responsibility.

Many of his hearers thought he was not renewing but selling out faith. They flocked to his lectures to grill him. One evening someone asked him whether it was a mortal sin to miss Mass on Sundays. (Mortal sins were a ticket to hell, and in church teaching to miss Mass on Sunday was a mortal sin.)

In response he began to explain the importance of free consent, grave matter and mature decision etc. His questioner interrupted him, demanding a yes or no answer. Arnie again took the conversation to a broader level, only to be told, 'You are evading the question, Father. Is it, or is it not, a mortal sin to miss Mass on Sunday?'

Arnie paused for a moment and said, 'Well, for you, it would be!'

I was reminded of this story when reading that four cardinals had sent a letter to the Pope demanding yes or no answers as to whether his reflection *Amoris Laetitia* was faithful to Catholic tradition in its treatment of the reception by divorced Catholics of communion. On not receiving a reply they published their letter, and one cardinal followed it up with murmurs about impeachment.

The incident prompts reflection on the propriety of cardinals questioning a pope in this way and on the reasons why discussion of communion for the divorced should raise such passion.

I am in two minds about the cardinals' action. Those who consider it inappropriate argue that cardinals are chosen to act as a pope's consultants. They cannot exercise this role effectively if they are involved in public disagreement with him.

They also argue that it is vital for any community organisation to focus on what matters: the cause it represents and the people it serves. The cardinals' action switches the focus to politics as politics—the disagreements and power relationships between its leaders—to the detriment of the Catholic Church.

The four cardinals argued that they were merely accepting the Pope's invitation to open discussion of the issues raised in *Amoris Laetitia*. Certainly, an open exchange of views can allow the truth to appear. It also allows people to assess which of the participants in the debate are trustworthy in their pursuit of truth. Demanding yes or no answers to complex questions may put lead in your saddlebags in that respect.

The second question raised by the cardinals' letter is why making space for some married and divorced couples to receive communion should arouse such anxiety. The fact that space already exists in much catholic pastoral practice may suggest that the concern is symbolic of a more general anxiety.

I find illuminating a 17th century precedent for this kind of passionate debate. It concerned the conditions under which it might be lawful to act contrary to a law. Some argued that any judgment that the law does not apply may be based on probable evidence, even if it is less probable than the opposing evidence. Others claimed that the evidence must be more

probable than that for observing the law. Others insisted you must follow the safest course of action and so obey the law regardless of probability.

This fairly abstract debate, which however had large consequences, raged strongly, with all sides demanding that the Pope adjudicate in their favour. Perhaps the most revealing contribution was that of the French polymath Blaise Pascal in his satirical *Lettres Provinciales*. He portrayed the Jesuit backed probabilist case as lax and worldly—a rent-an-opinion-and-you-can-justify-anything job.

Pascal was a recent convert to a rigorist Catholic group, influenced by a reading of St Augustine, which opposed frequent communion. This suggests that underneath the debate about moral decision making was the anxiety that if personal responsibility were not put under strong restraint it would lead to licence and to the dilution of Catholic faith.

Pascal's rigorism reflects two aspects of the inheritance that St Augustine left to the church. First, Augustine emphasised the extent of the corruption of human minds and hearts as a result of the sin of Adam. This generated fear that left to themselves, people will not make trustworthy judgments about right and wrong.

The second aspect of Augustine's



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inheritance derives from his portrayal of the church as a school within which people can learn to live just and ethical lives. This image can lead people to make paramount obedience to church teaching, and so can engender in them fear of moral collapse if it is disregarded.

Large fears of this kind fuelled the passion evident in the 17th century debates. They may also underlie the peremptory demands made of Pope Francis by the four cardinals.

Ironically the Pope also draws on Augustine's heritage. When he speaks of the great joy and energy that comes from knowing yourself to be a sinner who is loved by God and chosen to share that joy with others, he echoes Augustine's experience. In moral decision making, too, he may resonate with Augustine's aphorism: 'love, and do what you will'.

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