

## **POPE PROVES FLEXIBLE WITHIN LIMITS**

**Bill Donohue**

Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, "The Joy of Love," does not change a single teaching of the Catholic Church, but he does call on Catholics to be more understanding of the irregular family unions that so many find themselves in these days.

The Holy Father acknowledges that there are those, in and out of the Church, who harbor "an immoderate desire for total change without sufficient reflection or grounding." These Catholics will be disappointed, if not angry, that they did not get what they wanted. This unhappiness will also be found among those who possess "an attitude that would solve everything by applying general rules or deriving undue conclusions from particular theological considerations."

In short, Catholics who consider themselves very liberal or very conservative will have another opportunity to sulk.

The pope makes plain how inadequate it is to cast all discussions on family issues in terms of the nuclear family. He wants us to address the conditions that mark irregular families, and to minister to those in need. Priests, in particular, must exercise discernment in tending to those in unconventional unions: the ultimate goal is to implement "the logic of pastoral mercy."

Lest he be misunderstood, the pope is not suggesting that priests exercise flexibility outside the limits prescribed by Church teachings. "It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected," he says, "but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations."

For example, the divorced and remarried must not be treated with disdain, and indeed they must be approached with mercy. The same is true of those who live in other irregular unions.

Still, on four occasions in his statement, the pope cites the indissoluble nature of marriage; he also restates the Church's teaching on marriage as a union between those of the opposite sex. "There is a failure to realize that only the exclusive and indissoluble union between a man and a woman has a plenary role to play in society as a stable commitment that bears fruit in new life," he says.

The pope acknowledges that given the multiplicity of lifestyles, difficult moral judgments abound. He cautions against "thinking that everything is black and white," as if there were some kind of theological GPS device that can answer these questions with precision. This leads him to emphasize the role of conscience in making moral judgments.

Unfortunately, some commentators are already saying that the pope has decided that obeying one's conscience is all that is necessary to resolve moral problems. What is not being reported is that he is speaking about a "well-formed conscience," not some purely individualistic exercise absent a tutorial role for the Church. So when he says that "We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them," his emphasis on forming consciences cannot be ignored.

It is worth repeating his exact words on this subject. "Naturally," he instructs, "every effort should be made to encourage the development of an enlightened conscience, formed and guided by the responsible and serious discernment of one's pastor, and to encourage an ever greater trust in God's grace."

The pope's comments fit perfectly with what the Catholic Catechism has to say: "Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened." The Catechism also stresses that it "can happen that moral conscience

remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed."

Thus, those who see conscience as a piece of putty that can be twisted to justify any moral act will find no support in the pope's document or in the teachings of the Church.

The term "gay" is nowhere found in the pope's apostolic exhortation. There is one mention of homosexuals and two mentions of same-sex marriage. Nothing is said about the Church's teaching that the homosexual condition is "intrinsically disordered," meaning that the status quo has been upheld. At the same time, the pope wants us to respect homosexuals and to refrain from any unjust discrimination against them.

The pope affirms what the Synod Fathers said about same-sex marriage. He notes that "there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family." Similarly, he finds attempts to pressure Catholics into approving homosexual unions to be objectionable.

In short, the pope rejects the role of a scold, and looks askance at those who bury their head in the letter of the law. At the same time, he wants us to appreciate the wisdom of the Church's teachings on marriage, the family, and sexuality. He has not changed the bar, but he is asking us to help everyone clear it.