Vatican

Pope Francis spent 30 minutes Sept. 10 answering questions from his Jesuit confreres in Cartagena, Colombia. (CNS/handout, L'Osservatore Romano)



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Pope Francis appears to have responded indirectly to the four cardinals who publicly challenged him last year over his most recent teachings on family life, as contained in the 2016 apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*.

In a question and answer session with members of the Jesuit order in Colombia earlier this month, the text of which was made public for the first time Sept. 28, the pope referenced those who "maintain that there is no Catholic morality underlying *Amoris Laetitia*, or at least, no sure morality."

"I want to repeat clearly that the morality of *Amoris Laetitia* is Thomist, the morality of the great Thomas," said Francis, referring to 13th century Dominican theologian St. Thomas Aquinas.

"I want to say this so that you can help those who believe that morality is purely casuistic," the pope told the Jesuits, according to a text of the encounter published Sept. 28 by La Civiltà Cattolica. "Help them understand that the great Thomas possesses the greatest richness, which is still able to inspire us today."

Four cardinals wrote to Francis in September 2016 with five yes or no questions about how he understood church teaching following publication of the apostolic exhortation. After not receiving a response to their letter, the cardinals made their letter public in November 2016.

Among the questions they posed, the cardinals asked if the pope held that there are still "absolute moral norms" that prohibit Catholics from taking certain acts. They referred to such norms twice in their five questions.

Francis visited Colombia from Sept. 6-11 and met privately with about 65 Jesuits Sept. 10 during his visit to the city of Cartagena. The pope spoke about *Amoris Laetitia* in response to a question from a Jesuit about what kind of theological and philosophical questioning he wants the wider church to undertake.

He said first that he does not want philosophy to be undertaken "in a laboratory, but in life, in dialogue with reality." He referred to how Pope Benedict XVI had spoken of truth "as an encounter, that is to say no longer as a type of classification, but a path."

"The theology of Jesus was the most real thing of all; it began with reality and rose up to the father," said Francis. "It began with a seed, a parable, a fact ... and explained it."

"Jesus wanted to make a deep theology and the great reality is the Lord," said the pope. "I like to repeat that to be a good theologian, beyond studying you have to be dedicated, awake and seize hold of reality; and you need to reflect on all of this on your knees."

"A man who does not pray, a woman who does not pray, cannot be a theologian," he continued.

"They might be a living form of Denzinger, they might know every possible existing doctrine, but they'll not be doing theology," said Francis, referring to the 19th century *Handbook of Creeds and Definitions*, a frequently cited collection of the church's centuries of teachings written by German theologian Heinrich Denzinger.

"Today it is a matter of how you express God, how you tell who God is, how you show the Spirit, the wounds of Christ, the mystery of Christ."

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Francis also spoke to the Jesuits about what kind of position he thinks a pastor should take amid his people. He said a pastor has to continually shift between three positions: "in front to mark out the road, in the middle, to know it, and at the back to ensure nobody falls behind and to let the flock seek the road."

"The people of God have a good sense of smell," he said. "And sometimes our task as pastors is to be behind the people."

"The people of God have a good sense of smell," Francis repeated. "Perhaps the people struggle to communicate well, and sometimes people get it wrong. ... But can any of us say, 'Thank you, Lord, for I have never been wrong?'"

The four cardinals who challenged the pope over *Amoris Laetitia* were Carlo Caffarra, former archbishop of Bologna; Raymond Burke, spiritual patron of the Order of Malta, Walter Brandmüller; former president of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences; and Joachim Meisner, former archbishop of Cologne.

Caffarra and Meisner have since died.

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