



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS  
TO THE OFFICIALS OF THE TRIBUNAL OF THE ROMAN ROTA  
FOR THE INAUGURATION OF THE JUDICIAL YEAR**

*Clementine Hall  
Monday, 29 January 2018*

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**[Multimedia]**

*Dear Prelate Auditors,*

I greet you cordially, beginning with the Dean, whom I thank for his words. Together with you, I greet the officials, the lawyers and all the collaborators of the Apostolic Tribunal of the Roman Rota. I wish you all the best for the Judicial Year that we are inaugurating today.

Today I would like to reflect with you on a qualifying aspect of your judicial service, that is, on the centrality of the *conscience*, that of each one of you and, at the same time, that of the people whose cases you are dealing with. In fact, your service is also expressed as a ministry of the *peace of consciences* and requires that it be exercised *in full conscience*, as is well expressed by the formula with which your Sentences are issued: *ad consulendum conscientiae* or *ut consulatur conscientiae*.

Regarding the declaration of the nullity or validity of the bond of matrimony, in a certain sense, you figure as experts on the conscience of the Christian faithful. In this role, you are called to ceaselessly invoke divine assistance in order to carry out with humility and deliberation the serious task entrusted to you by the Church, thus demonstrating the connection between moral certainty, which the judge must pronounce *ex actis et probatis*, and the sphere of his conscience, known only to and helped by the Holy Spirit. In fact, thanks to the light of the Spirit, you are able to enter the sacred area of the conscience of the faithful. It is significant that the ancient *Adsumus* prayer, which was proclaimed at the beginning of each session of the [Second Vatican Council](#), is recited so frequently in your Tribunal.

The sphere of the conscience has been very dear to the Fathers of the last two Synods of Bishops, and has resonated significantly in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. This derives from the Successor of Peter and the Synod Fathers' mature reflection concerning the urgent need for the Pastors of the Church to listen to the petitions and expectations of those faithful who had silenced and repressed their consciences for many years, and later, were helped by God and by life to discern some light, turning to the Church to appease the conscience.

The conscience assumes a decisive role in the demanding choices that engaged couples have to face in order to welcome and build conjugal union and hence the family according to God's plan. The Church, a very tender mother, *ut consulatur conscientiae* of the faithful in need of truth, has recognized the need to invite those who work in marriage and family pastoral ministry to a renewed awareness in helping engaged couples to build and preserve the intimate sanctuary of their Christian conscience. In this regard, I would like to point out that in the two Documents issued Motu Proprio on the reform of the matrimonial process, I have exhorted those concerned to institute the diocesan pastoral investigation so as not only to hasten the process, but also to make it fairer, with the proper knowledge of the causes and reasons at the origin of the breakdown of the marriage. Furthermore, the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* — describing in the first five chapters the extraordinary richness of the conjugal pact drawn by God in the Scriptures and experienced by the Church throughout history — indicates the pastoral steps to be taken to help the engaged couple to undertake, without fear, discernment and the consequent choice of the future state of conjugal and family life.

A continuous experience of faith, hope and charity is all the more necessary so that young people may decide, with a sure and serene conscience, that conjugal union open to the gift of children is a great joy for God, for the Church, for humanity. The synodal journey of reflection on marriage and the family, and the subsequent Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, had an obligatory path and purpose: how to save young people from the commotion and deafening noise of the ephemeral, which lead them to forego the undertaking of stable and positive commitments for the individual and collective good. This conditioning silences the voice of their freedom, of that intimate cell — indeed the conscience — which, if he is allowed to enter, God alone illuminates and opens to life.

How precious and urgent is the pastoral action of the whole Church for the recovery, the safeguarding, the safekeeping of a Christian conscience, illuminated by the Gospel values! It will be a long, and not an easy undertaking, which requires bishops and priests to work tirelessly to illuminate, defend and sustain the Christian conscience of our people. The synodal voice of the Fathers and the subsequent Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* have thus established a primordial point: the necessary relationship between the *regula fidei*, that is, the fidelity of the Church to the untouchable Magisterium on marriage, as well as on the Eucharist, and the urgent attention of the Church herself to the psychological and religious processes of all persons called to the choice of marriage and family. Welcoming the guidance of the Synodal Fathers, I have already

recommended the commitment of a *matrimonial catechumenate*, intended as an indispensable itinerary for young people and couples aimed at reviving their Christian conscience, sustained by the grace of the two sacraments, Baptism and Marriage.

As I have explained on other occasions, the catechumenate is unique in itself, as it is baptismal — that is, rooted in baptism — and at the same time, in life it must assume a permanent character — as the *grace* of the sacrament of marriage is permanent — because *grace* is precisely fruit of the mystery, whose wealth can only be safeguarded and assisted in the conscience of spouses as individuals and as couples. In reality, these are the particular figures of that incessant *cura animarum* which is the *raison d'être* of the Church and, above all, of we Pastors.

However, the *care of consciences* cannot be the exclusive concern of Pastors; rather, with different responsibilities and methods, it is the mission of all, ministers and baptized faithful. Blessed Paul vi exhorted “absolute fidelity in order to safeguard the *regula fidei*” (*Insegnamenti xv* [1977], 663; ore 7 July 1977, 2), which enlightens the conscience and cannot be obscured or detached. To do this — Paul vi said — “it is necessary to avoid opposite extremisms, both on the part of those who appeal to tradition to justify their own disobedience with regard to the supreme Magisterium and the Ecumenical Council, and on the part of those who uproot themselves from the ecclesial *humus*, corrupting the genuine doctrine of the Church. Both of these attitudes are a sign of undue and perhaps unconscious subjectivism, if it is not, unfortunately, one of obstinacy, stubbornness, and imbalance. Such positions wound the heart of the Church, Mother and Teacher” (*Insegnamenti xiv* [1976], 500; ore 1 July 1976, 6).

Faith is a light that illuminates not only the present but also the future: *marriage and family* are the future of the Church and of society. It is therefore necessary to promote a state of *permanent catechumenate* so that the conscience of the baptized is open to the light of the Spirit. The sacramental intention is never the result of automatism, but always of a conscience illuminated by faith, as the result of a combination of the human and the divine. In this sense, spousal union can be said to be true only if the human intention of the spouses is oriented to what Christ and the Church want. In order to make future spouses ever more aware of this, the contribution is required not only of bishops and priests, but also of other people involved in pastoral care, religious and lay faithful who are jointly responsible in the mission of the Church.

Dear judges of the Roman Rota, the close connection between the sphere of conscience and that of the matrimonial processes that you deal with daily, demands that the exercise of justice not be reduced to a mere bureaucratic implementation. Should the ecclesiastical tribunals give in to this temptation, they would betray the Christian conscience. This is why, in the *processus brevior* procedure, I established not only that the supervisory role of the diocesan Bishop be made more evident, but also that he himself, a judge native to the Church entrusted to him, may consider in first instance possible cases regarding the nullity of marriage.

We must ensure that the conscience of the faithful experiencing marital difficulties not be precluded from a path of Grace. This aim is achieved through pastoral accompaniment, with discernment of consciences (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, 242) and the work of our tribunals. This work must be undertaken with wisdom and in the search for truth: only in this way can the declaration of nullity produce a liberation of consciences.

I reaffirm my gratitude to every one of you for the good you do for the People of God, serving justice. I invoke divine assistance on your work and I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you.