COURAGE
INTERNATIONAL

Dear Courage and EnCourage family,

The Gospel Wednesday was taken from John 15: 1-8 and is the allegory of the vine and the branches. As we all are aware He is the vine, and His followers are the branches grafted onto the vine through which they receive life and bear fruit. The Father is the vine dresser who prunes the vine to so that it bears the best possible fruit. While it is clear that we must find our life in Christ and that we only bear fruit by means of His life, what does it mean that the Father prunes the branches to draw out the best possible fruit?

When a vine is raised from a seed there is a significantly high statistical chance that it will not produce good fruit. To remove the chance of bad fruit, the viticulturist, or vine dresser, engrafts quality branches onto a quality vine. The natural stresses, or sufferings, that the vine will endure: hot/cold, wet/dry, soil quality, or a myriad of other possible things will directly affect the taste of the fruit produced by the branch. In fact, the viticulturist uses the natural response of the vine and it's branches to determine how to best prune them and draw forth the best possible fruit. He will repeat this many times over the life of the vine and branches and over centuries they will come to bear exquisite fruit, as long as he continues to prune them.

God does not desire or will for us to suffer. However, suffering is an inevitable reality of our fallen world. We cannot escape it. The Father seeing our suffering uses its natural occurrence to "prune" those things that keep us from producing the best fruit, thereby drawing us closer to Himself. The way this occurs is by facing our suffering and uncovering the root of it and through virtue maturing through the suffering. In some cases, we are able to mature through a suffering quickly, for others it may take a lifetime. As the life of Christ is lived by the Christian the Father guides them according to the suffering they encounter to guide them closer to Himself, making the person a saint. Suffering, through the habituated response of virtue, becomes a light burden and the person is able to find joy even in its midst, for the veil falls away and we are able to see the transcendent purpose to our suffering. God uses our lived experience and reality to draw us into becoming the best saint we could be according to the sufferings we have endured.

However, this suffering is not always due to an occurrence of nature: illness, flood, et cetera. Sometimes this suffering is due to broken relationships during formative times in our lives which cause wounds and those wounds cause us to think, feel, and act in ways to protect ourselves from the reality of that wound. When we encounter someone suffering in that way we must be compassionate. We must be willing to suffer with them and make their suffering ours. When another suffers with us, we are given the strength and confidence to confront our suffering and its underlying wound and mature through it to a place of fulfillment and joy. Courage and EnCourage exist to accompany people in that

suffering and to help them mature through it, becoming the saints all of us are called to be by our baptism.

Tuesday the Final Synodal Report for Group 9 was released, and the primary topic it seeks to address is the Church's pastoral response to same-sex attraction. Within the report the authors imply that Courage "pushed for reparative therapy."[1] However, the testimony states that he went to a Courage meeting at the "suggestion of a conversion therapist I met." He also shares that the members he met were lonely and depressed and the meetings were "secret" or "hidden." We regret that he had such an experience, Courage chapters can indeed go through ups and downs. It is too bad that he was unable to connect with the majority of our members who are joyful and who live happy and fulfilled lives.

From the beginning, Courage's only concern is a person's holiness. If you are a saint, then you will respond with virtue to whatever suffering may arise in your life. While some members have sought counseling and recommended it to others to try and change their temptations, Courage does not require nor promote "conversion" or "reparative" therapy. It is also important to remember that Courage's mission is to accompany those who have personally chosen to live a chaste life, not to convince those who are uninterested. The joy filled lives of our members are the best evangelical tool for convincing others to take a chance on a life of virtue.

The testimonies offered in the report are both from men who lead active homosexual lives and are civilly united to a same-sex partner. These testimonies do not reflect the Church's perennial teaching, nor do they allow for the witness of the many individuals who experience same-sex attraction, but who live happy and fulfilled chaste lives.

We would also like to revisit the Church's teaching briefly. God's proposed plan for human sexual pleasure includes the complementarity of the spouses, a commitment to permanence in the relationship, the faithfulness of the spouses to each other, and an openness to life. Each of these four characteristics is a necessary part of evaluating whether or not an action seeking sexual pleasure is in accord with the order of God's proposed plan or is outside that order, sinful.

Within this document there is a call for a "paradigm shift" in the Church's pastoral response to persons who experience same-sex attractions. However, the call comes at the behest of what has been heard in "the process." The Church has always welcomed collaboration with the faithful, especially in subjects where they are expert, though no one reached out to Courage during this process. And while the Sensus Fidei is a part of assessing whether a doctrine is a part of the magisterium, it cannot change doctrine on its own.[2]

Let us briefly treat what authentic development of doctrine. Authentic development of doctrine must be "in conformity with Sacred Scripture as it has been perennially understood within the living

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[1] If you wish to read the testimonies for yourself, you may do so here Testimony 1 testimony and Testimony 2. Testimony 2 refers to Courage.

[2] Fr. Weinandy has a wonderful article on Catholic Answers covering the authentic development of doctrine titled, *What Does it Mean for Doctrine to Develop?*

apostolic tradition, and as it has been consistently and authentically taught within the Church's magisterial tradition." The Catechism of the Catholic Church mentions four particular scriptures (Gen 19, Rom 12, 1 Cor 6, 1 Tim), and interprets them as saying that homosexual acts, not persons, are sinful. This interpretation is supported by Origen, Eusebius, and Chrysostom who even speaks of the pastoral response to such individuals as one grounded in living a chaste life, but full of "tender care." And this is born out into our own time through John Paul II and Benedict XVI's teachings which are clearly laid out in *Persona Humana* and *Homosexualitatis Problema*. Pope Francis also wrote a number of times on the subject clearly speaking of it as a sin and that the Church's teaching cannot change on the matter.[3]

In conclusion, while it is important for the Church to hear the voices of her people, it is sad that the testimonies chosen do not reflect the reality of the lived experience of many Courage members. While this is a document put together by members of the hierarchy, the report is technically a summary of the thousands of meetings that have come before, so it carries little or no magisterial weight. Remember that a whole commission advised that contraception was okay and Paul VI released *Humanae* Vitae after reading their report. Penultimately, the doctrine of the Church cannot say what was evil is now good according to her own rules about the development of doctrine. Finally, we know that there will be a lot of noise and commentary thrown around regarding this topic. When the Church stood in need of reform it was not a report, program, or often even the hierarchy that brought the reform about. It was the faithful like the men and women of Courage and EnCourage ignoring the sensationalism of the world and living saintly lives. Let us proclaim with our lives, "Love God and do what you will." God bless you and know that you are each in our prayers during this time.

[3] *Amoris Laetitia 250*, *Evangelii Gaudium 44*, *Gaudete et Exsultate 98*, *Misericordia et Misera 10*

Q & A Regarding Synod Final Report

What is this report? It is a summary of meetings had over the past few years as collated and emphasized by the authors.

Does it carry magisterial weight? No. It is a summary of cherry-picked testimonies and data that tell a story crafted by the authors and does not represent the experience of many in the Church, nor does it accurately reflect the perennial magisterial teaching on the matter.

Is this report a *Vatican* document? While it is a report issued by people who work at the Vatican, it is a consultative document. You could think of it like kids offering their opinion regarding how a family should spend its money. Their father will thank them and tell them that their opinions will be taken under advisement, but in the end, he makes the decision that is best for the family and in this case the pope will do so for the Church. So, it is a document of the Vatican, but it has no doctrinal weight, just like a memo about a meeting agenda.

In the 1960's Pope Paul VI called for a commission to investigate whether contraception was morally acceptable for married Catholics. The commission said yes and gave their final report to the pope. Paul VI then wrote one of the great encyclicals on human sexuality and human dignity, *Humane Vitae* which explicitly condemned the use of all forms of contraception by married Catholics. (They only considered the question regarding use inside marriage, because sexual acts outside marriage are already sinful.) The commission's report gave him the exact information he needed, though they came to a different conclusion.

What has the pope said about these things? Since being raised to the office of pope Leo XIV has spoken on the Church's teaching about sexual morality and homosexuality and in each case he has said: homosexual acts are a sin, God's intended plan for human sexual pleasure necessarily includes a man and a woman in the context of marriage, a person's dignity must always be respected, all human persons are called to chastity, and the Church's teaching on sexual morality cannot change.

What role does personal experience play in shaping doctrine? At the level of a single individual's experience, none. Even a group of individuals' experience would not have a significant impact on doctrine. Doctrine develops over time but flows forth from Sacred Scripture, the consistent apostolic interpretation of those scriptures, and consistent teaching by the Apostolic successors from the beginning up to our present age on a subject. If my experience contradicts that consistent teaching then my experience is what needs to be examined, not the Church's teaching. The tension between my experience and the unchanging truth is where pastoral accompaniment comes in. That is where a priest stands between me and God's will and helps me to mature through the suffering created by that tension to grow closer to God.

Could the Church's teaching on same-sex sexual acts as sinful change? No. As noted previously, the development of doctrine requires that any new development of a magisterial teaching of the Catholic Church must conform to the teaching that have come before. The Authority of the Church over matters of faith and morals is one of deeper understanding and defense, not one of research and novelty.

Is the virtue of chastity only for homosexuals and single people? No, the virtue of chastity is for all persons and is necessary for fulfilling and life-giving relationships. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2337-2359), but it is not about "not" doing things, it is about being fully possessed of the self so I can love others with my whole being. There is a misconception propagated in the report that creates one chastity for those who are opposite-sex attracted and another for those who are same-sex attracted. This would mean that God wills that certain moral principles are relative, which is not consistent with what has been revealed to us in Sacred Scripture.

Are the testimonies problematic? Yes. The testimonies are both taken from males who actively pursue same-sex sexual relationships according to their own testimony and who both are in civil unions with a same-sex partner. Furthermore, they state that they regularly attend the sacraments without repentance for their sinful actions. This does not reflect the reality of those who are living according to the Church's clear teaching regarding same-sex sexual acts and have been obedient to God's proposed plan for human sexuality.

How are we to understand Testimony 2? We regret that that individual had a negative experience of Courage, however, he has a misperception of what Courage does. We are only concerned about a person's holiness, if someone is holy then whatever temptation might come up will be responded to properly.

Does the report accurately present the testimony of Testimony 2? No, it does not. The person of Testimony 2 notes that he sought conversion therapy on his own and then was recommended Courage by his counselor. The report presents this as Courage "pushing for reparative therapy," which is false and inaccurate. Courage does not "push" or "recommend" "conversion" or "reparative therapies."

Is the report problematic? Yes. It increases Courage's profile within the Catholic Church in a slanderous and negative light and will affect our ability to minister. Our Board and Episcopal Board are taking steps to address this concern and the fact that an official document of the Church, albeit with minimal importance and no doctrinal standing, mentions Courage slanderously. We will let you know as this develops.

What are we doing? The Courage board and Episcopal board are in the process of reaching out and using their authority to have the report altered and Courage's name retracted. We will note their success on the website or in the newsletter. Since we will be working contrary to the cultural narrative, it will likely not have big headlines or fireworks.

Let us pray to our beloved Lord – who was falsely accused- to strengthen us and to foil the enemies of His Church. And that St. Francis de Sales, who was known for his commitment to truth when handling lies may strengthen us. So that we may speak the truth in Charity to all God's beloved children.