When did this happen? On Ash Wednesday 2016, while addressing his “Missionaries of Mercy,” Pope Francis said: “If someone comes to you and feels something must be removed from him, but perhaps he is unable to say it, but you understand … it’s all right, he says it this way, with the gesture of coming. First condition. Second, he is repentant. If someone comes to you it is because he feels he no longer wants to fall into these situations, but he doesn’t dare say it, he is afraid to say it and then not be able to do it. But if he cannot do it, ad impossibile nemo curatur [no one is held to do the impossible]. And the Lord understands these things, the language of gestures. Have open arms, to understand what is inside that heart that cannot be said or said this way … you understand me. You must receive everyone with the language with which they can speak.” Unfortunately, Pope Francis’ admonition is contrary to infallible Catholic doctrine.

How is this contrary to doctrine? All Sacraments are composed of matter and form. The actual confessing our sins to the priest constitutes the proximate matter of the Sacrament, while the formula of absolution constitutes the form. Pope Francis effectively claims that in some circumstances, it is permissible to reduce confession to the form only, and dispense with or “reinterpret” the matter by means of a vague “language of gestures.” Such a proposal is unheard of in granting absolutions. He recounts a scene from a novel Francis encourages priests to be as generous as possible. In his book, Francis effectively claims that in some circumstances, it is permissible to reduce confession to the form only, and dispense with or “reinterpret” the matter by means of a vague “language of gestures.” Such a proposal is unheard of in granting absolutions. He recounts a scene from a novel of Mercy. In his book, Pope Francis (and who knows Francis’ mind), recently published book Tenderness and Love, where he explains this “revolution of mercy” may lead to a less rigid and more “creative” exercise of various Catholic practices. Yet in the name of “inclusiveness,” “mercy,” “encounter,” and “going out to the peripheries,” Pope Francis exceeds some of the bounds of Catholic doctrine and discipline. This exacerbates today’s worldwide crisis of faith, and is a shocking means of subversion. What could be more cynical than to use the beautiful virtue of mercy as a means to cloak mọi impermissible revolution?

How do we judge what is right? Genuine Catholic doctrine must always be the ultimate standard for all Catholic activity, whether it be works of mercy, moral discipline or the priest in the confessional. Once once shift in the immutable doctrine of a “from the heart” approach, which over-emphasizes mercy, compassion and inclusiveness, we lose our grip on the universal, binding, immutable forms of moral behavior that drive us to an evolutionist situation wherein various aspects of Church practice will change from age to age – or even from decade to decade.

This instability is evident in Pope Francis’ reign, for Francis has always belonged to the progressive faction within the post-Conciliar Church. On March 29, 2015, Cardinal Ludwig Müller, Prefect for the Vatican’s Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, told La Croix that Pontificates such as John XXIII and Pope Francis are lacking in “theological structure.” Likewise Cardinal Raymond Burke, former head of the Roman Rota, lamented the Church under Pope Francis is like a “ship without a rudder.”

What do we do? We must first keep the Catholic Faith “whole and entire,” as we are commanded by the Athanasian Creed, without any change of novelty. St. Pius X, enemy of Modernism, insisted that love of novelty must be foreign to the priest as well as to the layman. We recall the great 16th Century Dominican theologian, Francisco de Vitoria, who taught along with St. Thomas, “Tenderness and Love, our life, our sweetness and our hope. She is indeed our model for the practicing of the Corporal and Spiritual works of mercy. Was not Her spectacular Miracle of the Sun at Fatima a dramatic means of instructing the ignorant and counseling the doubtful? At Fatima, She stressed mercy for sinners, along with the need for the daily Rosary, Five First Saturdays of Reparation, prayer and sacrifice. “Many souls go to hell,” lamented Our Holy Mother, “because they have no one to pray and make sacrifices for them.” She presented Her message of mercy not as a means to change Catholic practice in any way. Rather, She consistently reaffirmed the traditional doctrine of the Church, understood as Vatican I teaches, “in the same meaning and in the same explanation” of what the Church always taught throughout the centuries. Our Lady’s words and actions of Fatima present a remedy to the defects of our sinful world and demonstrate genuine compassion to souls, especially to those “most in need.”

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Picture Depicts Four of the Spiritual Works of Mercy Clockwise from the top: Instruct the Ignorant; Comfort the Afflicted; Pray for the Living and the Dead; Counsel the Doubtful.
How do we regard the virtue of mercy? St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that Charity is the greatest virtue. “But of all the virtues which relate to our neighbor,” he explains, “mercy is the greatest.” Yet mercy understood as a sentimental mollycoddling which does not encompass the totality of Catholic doctrine and morals, is a counterfeit mercy detrimental to souls.

Where do we find the model of true mercy? We find it in Our Lord, and exemplified in a special way in Our Lady. In the Visitation He released this teaching: “The Holy Queen Names Our Lady as “Mother of Mercy.”

Can you elaborate? Writing on the Holy Queen, Saint Alphonsus de Liguori notes the title of Queen of Mercy “implies kindness to the poor and solicitude for them. It is different from the title of empress, which usually denotes severity and rigor.” St. Alphonsus continues: “The greatness of kings and queens consists in helping the unfortunate. Tyrants have their hands full in good works; kings, on the other hand, are helped by the works of their subjects. That is why kings, when they are consecrated, have their heads anointed with oil. Oil is a symbol of mercy, and signifies that when a king governs, he should, before all else, be kind and compassionate to his subjects.”

What is true mercy? The eminent moralists Fathers McHugh and Callan teach: “Mercy is an inclination of the will to relieve the misery of another; it follows from charity ... for he who loves his neighbor as a friend in God must grieve over the misery of another; it follows from charity that one should consider one’s own good in view; kings should look to the good of their subjects. That is why kings, when they are consecrated, have their heads anointed with oil. Oil is a symbol of mercy, and signifies that when a king governs, he should, before all else, be kind and compassionate to his subjects.”

What are the Corporal Works of Mercy? The Corporal Works of Mercy are: 1) To feed the hungry; 2) to give drink to the thirsty; 3) to clothe the naked; 4) to harbor the stranger; 5) to visit the sick; 6) to present the captives; 7) to bury the dead.

These works must always be exercised according to reason and prudence. One is not expected, for example, to harbor the stranger if it would result in a serious disruption to family life, or if one has reason to believe the stranger constitutes any sort of danger.

What are the Spiritual Works of Mercy? The Spiritual Works of Mercy are: 1) To instruct the ignorant; 2) to counsel the doubtful; 3) to admonish the sinner; 4) to bear wrongs patiently; 5) to forgive offenses with the heart; 6) to comfort the afflicted; 7) to pray for the living and the dead.

These too must be exercised according to the virtue of prudence. For example, in respect to admonishing the sinner, the eminent catechist Father Francis Spigarolli teaches: “We must admonish our neighbor with gentleness and charity. The greater the gentleness and tact wherein a counsel is given, the more effectively does it produce.”

Is a true work of mercy a kind of remedy? Yes. The corporal and spiritual works of mercy conform to what is said above: mercy includes true pity and an effective remedy for the defect. The works of feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty cure the defect of ignorance when we instruct the ignorant this aspect of “remedy.” Likewise, with the spiritual works, we remedy the defect of ignorance when we instruct the ignorant and we remedy the confusion of uncertainty when we instruct the doubtful. A true work of mercy consists in a genuine cure, not a counterfeit remedy.

What do you mean by counterfeit remedy? A counterfeit remedy is manifest when the so-called work of mercy fails to remedy the principal defect, but addresses a substitute defect that leaves the principal defect intact. Modernist churchmen, even at the highest level, who wish to change established Church discipline to accommodate those living in irregular lifestyles, exercise a counterfeit. This aberration was on display at the 2014 and 2015 Synods on the Family, wherein radical prelates such as Cardinal Walter Kasper posed the divorced and remarried Catholics to be allowed to receive the Eucharist while remaining in their adulterous union. This proposal is advanced under the false notion of a more compassionate (more “merciful”) pastoral approach.

Why is this a counterfeit mercy? A counterfeit is something that resembles the real thing but is not the genuine coin. The alleged “new pastoral solution” for those living in sinful lifestyles has the same appearance of mercy, as it does seek to remedy defects and heal wounds. The problem, however, is that it seeks to heal the wrong wounds.

Rather than help those in irregular lifestyles recognize the seriousness of their condition and heal the wound of sin, that proposal seeks to heal the wound of sin and remedy one’s hurt feelings. The divorced and remarried Catholic feels “marginalized” by a Church that cannot accept his moral choice. But it is the Church that must seek a compassionate pastoral solution that is more tolerant and inclusive by finding a way to grant such a Catholic readmission to the sacraments. This approach addresses the defect of the irregular marriage, but leaves the soul in grave sin, and further leads him to sacrilegious Communion.

From where does this thinking come? Since the time of Vatican II, modernist theologians, who run rampant due to deficiencies in Church leadership, are in the lead in straining the works of mercy to effectively embrace the subjective rights of the person over the objective moral law. In simple terms, it is a system that places human will over human nature. It places “what I want” as higher than what God decrees.

The progressivist Redemptorist Father Bernard Haring, sometimes called the “Father of Modern Moral Theology,” a key drafter of the Vatican II document Gaudium et spes, advanced this “person over absolute moral norms” approach, which gave rise to a kind of situation ethics in the Church. This subsequently manifested itself in the “follow your own conscience” advice given by priests to Catholic couples who practice birth control in defiance of natural and Divine Law.

For example, in the Council to the present, countless moral theologians such as Father Joseph Fuchs and Father Richard McCormick advanced a kind of “consequentialism,” which effectively placed the subjective choice of the person as higher than the objective moral norm. Genuine Catholic moral teachers who insisted on the supremacy of absolute moral norms, over the subjective choices, were branded as “legalists” and “rigorists.” Traditional Catholic morality, it is claimed, puts “rules over people,” whereas a merciful and loving morality will be flexible according to the individual’s circumstances.

Is there an example of this improper “flexibility” that eclipses the discipline of the Church? We already alluded to what is called the “Kasper Proposal.” At the Consistory of Cardinals of February 2014, Cardinal Walter Kasper professed that divorced and remarried Catholics, after an undefined period of penance, be admitted to the Eucharist while remaining in their adulterous union. This was advanced in the name of “situationism” and “mercy.” Kasper claimed his “solution” was inspired by the “spirit of the Council, the Word of God in different human situations, as a message of fidelity, but also as a message of mercy, of life and of joy.”

Did Pope Francis correct Cardinal Kasper? This is the most disturbing part of the story. The day after Kasper’s speech, Pope Francis singled out Kasper for praise, advancing the idea that the “moral theologian” was a “serene theologian,” and rhapsodized, “this is what I call doing theology on one’s knees. Thank you. Thank you.” In April 2014, the Catholic world was further stunned to learn that Pope Francis had personally telephoned Jacqueline Sabetta Lisbona, an Argentine woman who had written to him complaining that her Church told her she could not receive Communion because she was married to a divorced man. Lisbona reportedly said the Pope had “absolved” her, and told her she was free to receive Holy Communion, even though she precinctively practiced birth control.

The Vatican Press Office, to this day, does not deny the conversation occurred, but only said at the time, “the magisterium of the Church is not defined by personal phone calls.” In October 2014, Vatican journalist Sandro Magister reported that when Pope Francis was Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he had “authorized the ‘curas villeros,’ the priests sent to the peripheries, to give Communion to all, although four-fifths of the couples were not even married.”

Modernist Catholics such as Hans Kung, Cardinal Kasper, and even ex-priest Leonardo Boff, praise these novel actions of Pope Francis as examples of “inclusiveness,” and “meeting people where they are.”

Thus in the name of counterfeit mercy, Pope Francis displays a “people over doctrine” anarcho-syndicalism that is foreign to the Catholic Faith of all time and opens the door to sacrilegious Communion. These actions fail to live up to the spiritual works of mercy to “instruct the ignorant,” and “admonish the sinner.”

Are there other instances of bending of Church doctrine to accommodate the person? Yes, serious ones. Within the context of the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis encourages Catholics to go to Confession – all week – and begin a “new path of repentance.” He underlines the most “serene theology” of the nature of the Sacrament when he recently counseled priests to, in some circumstances, grant absolution even when the person does not confess his sin.