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A Balancing Act

Reading 'Amoris Laetitia'

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Peter Steinfels

No doubt Pope Francis anticipated that within hours of issuing *Amoris laetitia*, battle lines would be forming—once again. Nonetheless, this “apostolic exhortation” is a valiant and powerful exercise in the Petrine ministry of upholding church unity. Francis achieves this in his deft summation and synthesis of the two synods on the family and in the counterbalancing of two chapters. He describes one as setting forth “some essential aspects of the church’s teaching on marriage and the family” and the other as “the pastoral discernment of those situations that fall short of what the Lord demands of us.”

This is a balancing act conservative critics have been quick to reject. The pope, they complain, has tried to embrace the key concerns of both of the major contending parties at the synods—and the result is an inadequate, inconsistent, or incoherent document that weakens church unity. What these critics miss is that Francis is asking us to enlarge our very understanding of that unity. “Not all discussions of doctrinal, moral, or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium,” he writes in the document’s third paragraph. “Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. John 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does.”

Does this statement, from the third paragraph of the document, really break new ground? It is, after all, carefully framed in negatives (“*Not all* discussions...this does *not preclude*...”); and no one would deny that conflicts and variations have always marked Catholic life. Yet the assumption has become widespread that if these are of any seriousness they are, at most, temporary anomalies awaiting magisterial rulings. Francis is suggesting that they may be a permanent, and valuable, character of Catholicism’s journey to the full-

ness of truth. It is a suggestion with deep implications for Catholic identity.

Like others, I was disappointed in some aspects of *Amoris laetitia*. One was its treatment of contraception. Whatever one’s view of the church’s virtually absolute condemnation of contraception, its repeated reaffirmation at the highest levels of church authority alongside its massive rejection by Catholic couples, many of them at great personal sacrifice “open to life,” has for decades seriously undermined the credibility of church teaching, especially in regard to sexuality and marriage. The non-reception of papal teaching on contraception has introduced toxic patterns of dissemblance at every level of church life. I was astonished at the 2014 synod’s perfunctory glance at the question and hoped for better from the 2015 gathering and from Pope Francis. I did not expect some definitive resolution, merely an acknowledgment of the problem that was honest and not self-satisfied and favorably disposed to renewed discussion down the road.

What I found instead was a single passage that seems to reaffirm the condemnation at what I consider its weakest point, namely that “*no* genital act of husband and wife can refuse this meaning,” i.e., being open to procreation (my emphasis). Pope Francis is surely aware of the chasm that this teaching has opened between devout Catholics, including clergy and theologians, and church authority, and of its cost to the church. I can only conclude that Francis has decided not to stir any further controversy but to let the matter take its own course, even if that course risks a festering wound or tolerating a poison in the bloodstream that eventually damages the church’s nervous system and brain cells.

Perhaps this is the prudent choice. Or perhaps it is a lost opportunity. My disappointment was probably like that of same-sex couples who were too well-schooled to expect any dramatic change in the church’s view of their relationships but nonetheless hoped for more than a brusque reiteration of the synod’s insistence 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.” (My emphases.)



Pope Francis greets newly married couples in St. Peter's Square, September 30, 2015.

I was still feeling the sting of disappointment when I began to read, a half-dozen pages later, Francis's chapter on "Love in Marriage." Departing from the synods' reports, he embarks on an eloquent reflection on 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. "Love is patient, love is kind..." Only a few days had passed since my parish's English-speaking RCIA group had met to discuss the sacrament of matrimony. Now, I thought, if only we had this chapter, perhaps supplemented by the exhortation's final chapter on "The Spirituality of Marriage and the Family," published as a separate booklet to hand out! A few hours later I discovered that Fr. Tom Reese, SJ, had already sent out an NCR analysis with this suggestion.

Given my disappointed state, however, it was important to recall that this passage from Paul, so favored for nuptial Masses, was not written with marriage in mind but rather in regard to unity and division in the church. Distressed as I was by Pope Francis's strategy of avoidance regarding contraception, love of the church called me to be patient and kind, not arrogant, rude, boastful, or insistent on my way, not irritable or resentful but generous, forgiving, rejoicing in the right, and bearing, believing, hoping, and enduring all things. In Francis's eyes, I am confident, the reverse is no less true: the church should exhibit all these traits toward each of its members. There are many profound observations in Francis's lyrical exhortation for spouses demanding application to the Body and its members, whether in the pews or the pulpits, whether in print or papal offices.

Chapter 8, on "Accompanying, Discerning, and Integrating Weakness," addresses the church's response to the "irregular" situations that dominated media attention during the

synods, primarily divorced and remarried Catholic couples seeking to receive Communion and, secondarily, cohabitating couples in relationships with many of the characteristics of marriage. The plight of the divorced and remarried is a very legitimate pastoral concern, but why, I have wondered, did it become so all-consuming? The numbers of those who have not already made their own conscientious decision about church participation and reception of Communion pale, in my opinion, next to the scores of millions of families shattered by war, broken by deprivation, or entrapped in refugee camps—or of young adults permanently alienated from their faith by accurate or inaccurate views of Catholic teachings on sexuality.

But so be it. Chapter 8 is a greatly needed examination of how those of us striving to be formed by the words and deeds of Jesus should relate general laws to particular cases. In many ways, the chapter articulates at a deep level what many loving Christians intuitively do in their own families and circles of close friends.

I have one caveat about the theme of mercy, so prominent in the exhortation and this jubilee year, so beautifully preached by Francis. It is hard to say this, but the availability of mercy can be a tool of the powerful, an excuse for not reforming unjust laws or harsh practices, an alibi for skirting uncomfortable questions, a sop for those injured, a safety valve for discontent. Granting mercy can be an exercise in domination, a means for officeholders to demonstrate their power. This is not the mercy of God, not the mercy of love. Nothing, I think, could be further from what Pope Francis has in mind. But it remains a temptation for institutions and institutional authorities.

Where do we go from here? *Amoris laetitia* confirms

the synod process as “both impressive and illuminating...a multifaceted gem reflecting many legitimate concerns and honest questions.” Elsewhere, the pope has affirmed “synodality” in even stronger terms as essential to the church. I hope that implies, as Fr. Antonio Spadaro was quoted as saying, “The apostolic exhortation was not just the last step of a long process.” Spadaro, the editor of *Civiltà Cattolica*, had conducted the remarkable interview in which the newly elected Francis spoke boldly about the church’s growth in understanding of the truth. I hope that the Jesuit editor is correct when he says of *Amoris laetitia*, “It is going to be another starting point.” ■

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Paige E. Hochschild

A *Amoris laetitia* is a long and sometimes frustrating document, even to those familiar with Pope Francis’s discursive style. In the initial paragraphs, he defends its length and lays out his overall approach, urging readers eager for his views on current contested issues to jump to Chapter 8. However, the pope says that the “two central chapters” (4 and 5) are those on love, followed by practical and pastoral advice with regard to marriage and parenting.

So how does Francis think about love? Some of the pope’s language, while familiar, is not particularly helpful. For instance, the over-interpreted phrase “domestic church” is invoked, and the family is described as an icon of the inner life of the Trinity—an unbiblical idea that has appeared in some recent magisterial teaching, largely due to the influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Francis’s thinking becomes clearer after reading the first three chapters. Love and marriage, he notes, are not identical, but marriage is the appropriate home for love precisely because the essential character of marriage is *indissolubility*. More important, the end of marriage is conformity to Christ. These two theological ideas—indissolubility and growth in the likeness to Christ—sum up how Francis thinks about love.

Indissolubility is defended as part of the intentionality of love, which entails a whole shared life. Perpetuity, Francis says, is simply part of the language of love. Lovers do not see their relationship as temporary; those marrying really mean their vows. It is the nature of love—of conjugal love—to be “definitive.” The expectations of children reflect this natural longing for indissolubility. Children want their parents to love each other and to stay together. Indissolubility is not “a yoke,” but rather a sharing in God’s faithful, “indulgent love,” which should “heal and transform hardened hearts.”

In a striking commentary on St. Paul’s hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13, the pope lays out the virtues necessary for living in “definitive” union with another. Envy, he observes, is contrary to love because it is a kind of sadness at the good fortune of another. Real love observes the virtue of justice, and therefore does not covet. Francis often reminds us of how hurtful lovers can be to one another through slander, resentment, self-assertion, or a “lack of concern for others.” To speak well of another is not simply to put on a good “public face,” or manifest a naïve adoration. Love requires us to see with realism the faults and limitations of others, but then to see them as part of a much larger picture. Love, he says, “does not have to be perfect for us to value it. The other person loves me as best they can, with all their limits.” To “bear all things” is to abide with another despite his or her inevitable limitations. This lengthy and winsome study of love’s virtues is often right on the mark, as well as deeply Christological in its spirituality.

Several themes emerge from the two central chapters. Love is hard because forgiveness is hard; love is not a feeling but a desire for the good of the other; love is generous, since charity is more about the desire to love than the desire to be loved; love is imperfect because no person can be God to us or “serve all my needs.” Although the pope affirms the warmth of the first flush of love, and the tenderness of intimacy, love in the fullest sense is described as a hard labor and as an enduring friendship. Marriage, he says, is a challenge. In it, love is something to be fought for, cultivated, and renewed. Joy is found in “expansion of the heart”; it is not about seeking pleasure, but about the joy of “helping and serving another.”

Surprisingly *Amoris laetitia* seems addressed to a privileged and distracted audience, rather than the global South that is so often Francis’s concern. While acknowledging the special support needed by the poor and the elderly, the pope focuses on the social and cultural problems associated with the secular “West.” He opens Chapter 2 with a strong critique of an individualistic culture. A desire for authenticity and personal fulfillment is fine, but it can lead to “suspicion, unwillingness to commit, and self-centeredness.” He criticizes a desire for freedom that lacks “noble goals or personal discipline.” He observes that fear of loneliness co-exists with fear of “entrapment in a relationship” that might hinder personal development or professional advancement. The church must not be defensive or overly critical, but it must speak plainly about what is unhealthy in culture or contrary to the Gospel. Subjecting love to the logic of consumption, using others for pleasure or narcissistic self-interest, or being closed to the possibility of children, are all serious failings. The allure of instant gratification and the feeble offerings of an ephemeral culture should be resisted. All these temptations are deeply contrary to the form and end of marriage, which is consistently described as a process of ongoing spiritual discernment and personal growth.

Two signal accomplishments should be highlighted and further discussed. First, Pope Francis conceives of marriage in strong terms as a *public or common good*. Married love is fruitful; it is outward looking to its community, to its parish, and to the world. Sacrificial self-giving must spill beyond the walls of the home. For example, families must reach out to their larger family, supporting teenage mothers in their community, children without parents, and the disabled. Francis warns that marriage is often seen as a “mere spontaneous association...a private affair,” rather than a “firm decision to leave adolescent individualism behind.” As such, marriage is a “social institution...a shared commitment, for the good of society as a whole.” In this regard, Francis is closer to a Thomistic understanding of sexual intimacy as ordered to the common good than to the emphasis on the “unitive-procreative” nature of the conjugal act characteristic of recent theological reflection.

As a second notable accomplishment, the pope calls for local development and creative adaptation of his pastoral recommendations for the support of family life. For example, in Chapter 6 he calls for better seminary preparation to help priests minister to families with complex problems. In this regard, priests need to understand their own family wounds. At the same time the mutual support and illumination that ideally flow from the interaction of celibates and married couples need to be encouraged. Still, much of the work of marriage preparation and support must come from the laity, especially during the early years of marriage. The wedding ceremony receives critical attention: this event is not the end of the road, but rather an initiation into a lifelong calling. Dispense with the costly venues and clothes, Francis says, and make the marriage ceremony again a solemn witness, and a “more modest and simple celebration” for the entire community. This might seem a trivial point, but imagine what a powerful witness wedding ceremonies could become as occasions to celebrate and proclaim the Gospel if they were restored to the center of parish life. In short, the parish is identified as the crucial locus, both sacramental and practical, for the formation and renewal of Christian love. This is a tremendous challenge and invitation for the church in this country.

Missing from this lengthy document is a sense of how theological reflection might contribute directly to marriage and a healthy sense of Christian love. The relationship between the church and the family is also underdeveloped. This absence is mitigated by the practical approach to the challenges of married love that gives us a surprisingly moving exhortation to a demanding, courageous, and sanctifying way of life. *Amoris laetitia* offers what the church must offer the world right now: an attractive and noble presentation of a high and courageous calling.

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William L. Portier

In *Amoris laetitia*, Pope Francis sets out to gather up “the contributions of the two recent synods on the family.” He describes the interventions at the synods by bishops from all over the world as “a multifaceted gem reflecting many legitimate concerns and honest questions.” Seeking to do justice to this plethora of local concerns and questions, he relies heavily on the final *Relationes* produced by both the 2014 and 2015 synods, and even cites occasionally the results of the pre-synod surveys of the laity. He also cites ten different episcopal-conference documents on marriage and family, eight from the global South. The resulting document steers, mostly successfully, between an “immoderate desire for total change without sufficient reflection or grounding” and “an attitude that would solve everything by applying general rules or deriving undue conclusions from particular theological considerations.”

This apostolic exhortation is long, sometimes tough going, more often inspiring, and bound to disappoint a wide range of readers. *Humanae vitae*, for example, is cited a few times and reaffirmed, but the question of artificial contraception, and the seeming *sensus fidei* regarding it, is neither reemphasized nor revisited. Presuming Gospel teaching on the indissolubility of marriage, the exhortation refuses to offer any new set of general canonical rules on marriage or on Communion for Catholics in irregular canonical situations. Francis acknowledges “constructive elements” in the unions of those who are divorced and remarried without annulment, and the inadequacy of describing Catholics in such unions simply as “excommunicated” or living in sin. At the same time, he fails to explore the theological questions concerning how such people might participate in what St. Augustine described as the “goods of marriage.” These relationships cannot simply be reduced to sin, but how the church, by analogy with its perspective on other faiths at Vatican II, might recognize and affirm what is good and true in them is a question left unanswered. Most bitterly disappointing to many, though certainly not all, American readers will be the exhortation’s failure to address the same questions regarding gay and lesbian unions. Nor does the document explore pressing theological questions about the role of LGBT people in God’s created order or about why the church cannot recognize same-sex unions as marriages.

That said, Francis’s primary concern is neither doctrine nor theology. Rather, he’s trying to start a pastoral revolution among the bishops, clergy, and people of the Catholic Church. If his two papal predecessors were about clarity and definition in tumultuous times, Francis wants to send missionary disciples out beyond the church’s boundaries, clearly marked out over the past thirty-five years, to ecclesial peripheries where those in difficult marriage situations live. He insists all the while that Jesus’ ideal of indissoluble marriage never be watered down. Instead of a smaller, purer



church, however, Francis offers an “invitation to mercy and the pastoral discernment of those situations that fall short of what the Lord demands of us.” If this document has a signature phrase, it is the Ignatian-sounding “pastoral discernment,” a form of accompaniment in which pastoral care for families is fundamentally a missionary going-forth.

Throughout this document Francis speaks in his own recognizable and now familiar voice. This comes across most clearly in Chapter 8, titled “Accompanying, Discerning, and Integrating Weakness.” “I understand,” Francis writes, “those who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion. But I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a church attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness.” In preceding chapters, Francis urges on the church “a healthy dose of self-criticism” for “excessive idealization” that at times proposes “a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families.” *Amoris laetitia* clears a space for pastorally attending to those situations and possibilities.

Pope St. John Paul II, who appointed Jorge Bergoglio a bishop in 1992 and was later canonized by him in 2014,

hovers over this text. Of the 391 notes, almost 50 refer to the writings of John Paul. Francis relies strongly on the late pope’s instructions from the early 1980s that became the basis for the theology of the body, and on *Familiaris consortio*, his 1981 post-synod Apostolic Exhortation on the family. In discussions surrounding the two recent synods, however, voices opposed to the sort of pastoral discernment Francis urges in *Amoris laetitia* appealed frequently to theological developments of John Paul II’s theology of marriage. I’m thinking specifically of strong ontological readings of the language in Ephesians 5:21-32 that compares the relation of Christ and the church to that of husband and wife. Despite his obvious reliance on John Paul II’s theology of marriage, Francis is careful to distance himself from such readings, making clear that, although legitimate possible interpretations of Scripture, they are not to be equated with the teaching of the church. Theologically speaking, Francis’s treatment of Ephesians 5 and its marriage metaphor is one of the most striking aspects of this document.

Absent from Chapter 1’s survey of families in the Bible, Ephesians 5 appears first in Chapter 3, in an extended quote from the *Relatio* of the 2014 synod. Redeemed in Christ, marriage and the family have been “restored to the image

of the Holy Trinity...the spousal covenant, originating in creation and revealed in the history of salvation takes on its full meaning in Christ and his church." Beginning with a citation from *Familiaris consortio*, the marriage analogy of Ephesians 5 is treated at length.

The lyrical Chapter 4, "Love in Marriage," returns again to the marriage imagery of Ephesians 5—in Francis's language, the "icon of God's love for us." The sacrament imparts a "proper mission" to married couples, so that, "starting with the simple ordinary things of life they can make visible the love with which Christ loves the church and continues to give his life for her." There follows what I take to be the most theologically important passage in this document: "We should not however confuse different levels: there is no need to lay upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union existing between Christ and his church, for marriage as a sign entails 'a dynamic process..., one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God.'"

The last line of this quotation is from *Familiaris consortio* and makes an appeal to "gradualism," a key to Francis's pastoral discernment. He goes on to attribute the "so-called 'law of gradualness'" to John Paul II with extensive citations from *Familiaris consortio*. With reference to constant growth in mutual love over time, Francis writes, "Marital love is not defended primarily by presenting indissolubility as a duty, or by repeating doctrine, but by helping us to grow ever stronger under the impulse of grace." And again: "It is not helpful to dream of an idyllic and perfect love needing no stimulus to grow."

Francis begins the exhortation with his strange-sounding claim that, in thinking about families, "time is greater than space." He takes that to mean that "not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium" and that "every general principle...needs to be inculturated." He concludes with a moving meditation on families as they pass gradually through time. "Our contemplation of the fulfillment which we have yet to attain," he writes, "also allows us to see in proper perspective this historical journey which we make as families.... It also keeps us from judging harshly those who live in situations of frailty." Chapter 6 on Pastoral Perspectives gives lyrical expression to this sense of time's priority, describing each marriage as "a kind of salvation history."

If Pope John Paul II was the philosopher-pope and Pope Benedict XVI the theologian-pope extraordinaire, Pope Francis is the poet-pope, an urban gaucho from Buenos Aires, giving voice to the dreams and wisdom of migrants and the poor and displaced. Though it will not satisfy everyone, *Amoris laetitia* offers an extraordinary set of reflections on marriage, various parts of which will serve audiences as diverse as engaged couples, husbands and wives, pastoral workers, bishops, and theologians. Neither "dry and lifeless doctrine" nor "dead stones to be hurled at others," Francis's

words about family life ring true, making his advocacy for scriptural ideals of marriage all the more attractive. I have been married for forty-five years. Chapter 4's meditation on St. Paul's hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13 moved me deeply. Despite its length, time spent with *Amoris laetitia* is time well spent. ■

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Sandra Yocum

Pope Francis opens *Amoris laetitia* ("The Joy of Love"), his new apostolic exhortation concerning marriage and the family, with a variation on a theme begun in his first exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium* ("The Joy of Gospel"). A quick Google search to understand the difference between *gaudium* and *laetitia*, led to the "Father John A. Harden, SJ, Archives," where Harden offers an illuminating explanation. Advent's *gaudium* is more inward, like a missionary disciple's abiding joy; Lent's *laetare* concerns rejoicing made manifest—*Amoris laetitia*! Francis is celebrating the joy-filled witness of Christian marital love, the deepest truth of the sacrament's indissolubility made manifest in the human flourishing and deepening of faith-filled charity in the daily lives of spouses, their offspring, and the communities composed of those families.

The indissolubility of marital love is surely the rock on which couples rest and to which they sometimes cling during crises. Francis regards indissolubility as a "gift" rather than a "yoke," and chides those whose efforts to defend marriage reduce the gift to a "duty." He assures us that Christian care for the divorced and civilly remarried is not "a weakening of its faith and testimony to the indissolubility of marriage," but "a particular expression of charity."

In some sense, the trauma that accompanies most divorces, even those guided by genuine spiritual discernment, testifies to just how powerful the marriage bond is. If married life were a piece of cloth being woven on a loom, divorce is not sharp scissors swiftly separating cloth from loom, and then creating two tidy pieces; it is more like a rough stick or protruding nail that rips the cloth off the loom, leaving two badly frayed, uneven pieces, a tangle of emotions and loss. Recognizing that marriages do fail does not lessen the trauma of divorce. In a way, the church's teaching on marriage, as Pope Francis describes it, illuminates why divorce is so wrenching.

I am among those who know the trauma of divorce, something that a decade ago I could never have imagined. I also sought and was granted an annulment; I am now married in the church. In retrospect, those experiences revealed the wonders of God's mercy as they deepened my faith in the Paschal Mystery and taught me more about humility than I

ever wanted to learn. I was blessed to draw on a host of material and pastoral resources that, as the pope observes, are too often unavailable to the poor, leaving them “doubly vulnerable to abandonment and possible harm” and thus intensifying their suffering.

What follows are a few simple reflections on the complexities involved in the pastoral care of the divorced and remarried, punctuated with stories from Catholics I know who saw in our common experiences of divorce a reason to confide in me. Such stories raise many difficult questions, including the extent to which the church’s pastoral care means helping faithful Catholics discern whether their “cross” comes in seeking a divorce rather than remaining in a troubled marriage. Deep feelings of failure and shame are often felt by those who seek a divorce. For example, one divorced person has confided in me her strong sense of God’s rejection. I assured this person that God never has and never will stop loving her. As Francis makes clear, the church must provide spiritual care as well as psychological and material support to all those going through divorce.

The utter simplicity of such a starting point belies the many challenges involved in pastoral care for the divorced and remarried. An extra share of wisdom, prudence, and patience is required. Above all, however, ministering to the divorced demands time—something most clergy simply do not have. How can the church better serve the many in need of such pastoral care? Pope Francis’s counsel in this exhortation seems to echo *The Joy of the Gospel*, where he urges the church to “initiate everyone” into the “art of accompaniment,” learning how to walk with another “reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates, and encourages growth in the Christian life.” Yet such accompaniment is risky and may not turn out as we hope.

I presume that the church is willing to take that risk in a desire to make manifest God’s reconciling love in Christ. In considering “irregular” marriages, Francis “reiterates” his message to the whole church: “the way of Jesus is the way of mercy and reinstatement” rather than “casting off.” “The way of the church is not to condemn anyone forever,” he writes, “it is to pour out the balm of mercy.” Like the syn-

od’s bishops, he wants divorced and civilly remarried Catholics to understand themselves as “living members, able to live and grow in the church and experience her as a mother who welcomes them always.” Yet such desire removes little of the alienation felt by those Catholics in “irregular” marital situations.

The civilly remarried remain in a tenuous situation regarding sacramental participation, and many divorced Catholics simply feel unwelcome at Eucharistic liturgy. The annulment process, unlike civil divorce, can offer a pathway into Christ’s healing power. But for many people, the annulment process raises the prospect of reliving the trauma of a failed

relationship. Many others do not have the economic means to proceed. The question remains: How can the alienated, and especially the poor and their children, come to know God’s infinite mercy?

Jesus, who incarnates God’s mercy, sought out the lost sheep, much to the chagrin of his own religiously devout peers. He shared meals with tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, and other outcasts. Have you ever wondered what they discussed? Did Jesus listen to their stories in the way Francis calls us to listen to one another? Perhaps the Gospel invitation most frequently ignored involves following after Christ as he seeks out and listens to the stories of the brokenhearted. Such tasks are difficult,

especially among those of us who are prone to be self-righteous or risk-averse.

Jesus’s parables illustrate the challenges. I will focus on two, beginning with the Prodigal Son. After a hard day’s labor, the elder son comes home to an unexpected party for his worthless brother, and he is furious. He lashes out at his father, who had never even given him “a young goat to feast on with his friends.” How often are views about the divorced and remarried like those of the dutiful elder brother, especially among couples who have remained in difficult marriages? That is, of course, completely understandable. Yet the elder brother knows nothing of his sibling’s suffering, which presumably is result of his own bad choices. Similarly, those who resent the divorced often know nothing of their suffering, however self-inflicted. In the parable, our perspective is shifted away from the resentful son to the

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father's prodigal generosity. "My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours," the father tells the aggrieved elder sibling. To remain mired in self-righteousness removes us from God's constancy and abundant care in our own messy lives. In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Francis explained how our willingness to accept accompaniment with those on the periphery "will teach us to be patient and compassionate with others, and to find the right way to gain their trust, openness and their readiness to grow." The prodigal father gently invites his eldest son to accompany him into the banquet of abundant compassion that lies just across his own threshold.

Finally, I turn to a parable-inspired personal story. Someone confided to me an all-too-familiar tale of a failed marriage: a spouse now unrecognizable, openly engaged in an extramarital affair, shared on Facebook; depression so debilitating that getting out of bed even to attend Mass proved impossible. In the process of ending the marriage, the person returned to Mass on a weekday when the Gospel was Luke's parable of the lost sheep. Jesus begins, as only Jesus can, with a crazy question: "What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it?" This question is really a response to those objecting to Jesus eating with sinners. I imagine his listeners murmuring to each other, "Did he say, 'in the desert?'" and then muttering, "No one, Jesus. No one!" Of course, the lost sheep is found, and the shepherd (like the prodigal father) throws a party—for a sheep! Friends and neighbors partake in his joy, a joy like that in heaven when a single sinner repents. My confidant declared: "I was that lost sheep, and I knew at that moment that God had never stopped loving me. I realized that my faith meant everything to me."

We will never know if all those sinners with whom Jesus ate repented, but we do know that he loved them to the end and that by doing so he alienated a lot of his religiously pious peers. Still, accompanying the divorced and civilly remarried is not about being "nice" or making them repent or capitulating to a disordered larger culture. In his new exhortation, Pope Francis, using a familiar Scripture-inspired marital image, calls the church to manifest Christ's *amoris laetitia*. "The Bride of Christ must pattern her behavior after the Son of God who goes out to everyone without exception.' She knows that Jesus himself is the shepherd of the hundred, not just of the ninety-nine. He loves them all. On the basis of this realization, it will become possible for 'the balm of mercy to reach everyone, believers and those far away, as a sign that the kingdom of God is already present in our midst.'" Francis invites us all into the parable's world, to imagine ourselves as God's beloved, awash in the "balm of mercy," because that is who we are. ■

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Dennis O'Brien

Many Catholics have been deeply troubled by Pope Francis's emphasis on mercy and forgiveness as the primary gestures of the church. Such an approach, they argue, seems to run directly counter to the church as the defender of objective moral truth. To these critics, John Paul II's denunciations of "the culture of death," Benedict XVI's repeated warnings about moral relativism, and the American bishops' forthright condemnations of abortion, gay marriage, or assisted suicide better exemplify the role of the church as teacher of truth, defender of doctrine, and moral guide. Critics of Francis think that by leading with mercy and forgiveness the church trivializes sin and moral failure, justifying the old claim that Catholics have it easy when it comes to immorality. They sin easily because a quick turn in the confessional box and two Hail Marys clears the record. To understand Francis and support the direction he has been setting for the church, I believe we need to think more deeply about the ways and means of "forgiveness."

One of my favorite *New Yorker* cartoons depicts the traditional psychiatric scene with a patient stretched out on a couch and the psychiatrist perched in a chair with a notebook. In the cartoon the psychiatrist leans toward the patient and says, "Why you swine, you!" A bad start for psychotherapy. The governing assumption for psychotherapy is that the therapist is a forgiving presence. However deviant or disturbing the patient's behavior, the therapist does not act as moral judge. The psychiatrist's job is to cure the aberrant behavior, not condemn it. Psychotherapy is "forgiving" not only because it avoids a moral censure, but primarily because it is based on the assumption that the patient has a core of mental health. A determined posture of moral rejection would in effect regard the patient as psychically beyond cure.

Psychiatric practice rests on a reconfiguration of behavior from morality to medicine. The great twentieth-century Jewish theologian, Franz Rosenzweig, makes a similar transition in a small book titled in translation *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man, and God*. (A more accurate non-sexist translation of the German: "A Booklet about Sick and Healthy Human Understanding.") Rosenzweig recast morality into "medical" categories. Sin is not just bad behavior, it is spiritual sickness. Immorality is a symptom. There is no use alleviating the symptom without addressing the spiritual disease. Immoral conduct can, of course, be controlled by coercion yet leave the person's spiritual state no better—and often worse—than before. Repressed conduct can be even more corrosive to the soul than direct expression. Pope Francis echoed Rosenzweig when he described the church as a "field hospital" for

the spiritually wounded. Keeping this shift in mind, I want to consider the assumptions and practices of secular psychotherapy and how they may illuminate the spiritual soul therapy of the church.

Physical medicine can be administered impersonally, from outside and above. An antibiotic stops the infection no matter how grumpy the patient or indifferent the physician. Psychotherapeutic cure occurs only with the personal involvement of patient and therapist.

Patients must come to understand themselves and their distorted world view. Thus the old joke: "How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?" Answer: "None, the light bulb has to change itself." If patients in some sense cure themselves, what is the role the therapist? Listening.

To understand the damaged self and also discover the core of mental health, the therapist listens to the patient's self-description, concerns, and fantasies. The distinguished psychotherapist, Lawrence Kubie, called it "listening with the third ear." In physical medicine the physician can generally depend on the self-reporting of the patient. "No, the pain is more in the ankle." Not so in psychotherapy. What the patient says is critical, often not for what it reveals, but for what it conceals. Listening with the third ear, the therapist catches the tones, the hesitations, and phrases that emerge from the depths of the patient's psyche. The critical problem for psychotherapy is getting the patients to recognize their damaged selves. Conversation between patient and therapist can reveal what is hidden. Therapists not only listen with the third ear, they must create a bond of trust that allows the patient to accept a more realistic view of their world from the therapist. Final cure in psychotherapy occurs when trust in the voice of the therapist allows the patient to reconstruct the self and the world.

The psychiatric patient is, we say, out of touch with reality. Rosenzweig's spiritually sick were out of touch with the real world of man, and God. If the church is to be a field hospital to the spiritually sick, it needs a soul therapy that resembles secular psychotherapy: forgiving, listening, helping individuals to recognize their damaged selves so as to create a true relation to the world. The first assumption for Christian spiritual therapy is forgiveness because one seeks to reach what Simone Weil called "the deep part of the soul that dwells intact and is perfectly innocent in every human being, including the most despoiled." Moral denunciation alone ignores the deep innocence of the soul. Deep listening with a third ear is the only opening to the soul. Finally, the

spiritually damaged must come to trust the church as proper witness to the "real" world.

Shifting from moral censure to listening for the spirit is a fundamental change for which the Church is in many ways woefully under-prepared. (Conservative critics are right: Francis is revolutionary.) Not the least of the barriers to change is the dominant face of moral denunciation in church history and rhetoric. It is much easier to categorize someone's conduct under a moral rule, than to understand someone's spiritual state. The priestly confessor needs to find the penitent's damaged soul that emerges in some putative sin. The Curé of Ars was a great confessor because he had the gift to "read souls." It would be splendid if individual

confessors could be trained to read souls, but it is a rare gift. Confessors could, however, learn to ask questions directed beyond conduct in order to reach the spirit. Finally, of course, penitents must trust the confessor's and the church's love and care if they are to believe in the reality of the Christian world.

The most difficult challenge for the church will be asserting the Christian view of the world as "the real world." For many today nothing seems more unreal than the Biblical story. In assessing reality, one can start with a possible spiritual sickness and its "unreal" world. Thoreau suggested

that the vast majority live in a state of quiet desperation. Kierkegaard pointed out that the opposite of Christian faith is not unbelief but despair. Is spiritual despair sickness or health? Whatever "unreality" may be assigned to Christianity, it at least pictures a world beyond despair. Pope Francis reminds us of *The Joy of the Gospel*: a vision in which we understand humanity as caught up in a world of love—"the love that moves the sun and the other stars."

A final comment on "forgiving." Is a forgiving church somehow a weak and indecisive reality? I think not. At various times I have been involved with architects charged to design areas subject to considerable wear and tear. I was surprised to have them recommend wood for surface treatments. Wood is "forgiving." Unlike hard surfaces like tile, wood is resilient, absorbing blows that would disfigure a harder surface. The church should be forgiving in that sense. After two thousand years of a wayward and contentious history, the church can claim the resilience, integrity, and wisdom of ancient oak. ■

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