June Reflections, 2016 Vol 38 No 10

The Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (“The Joy of Love”), officially issued by Pope Francis on the feast of St. Joseph, March 19, 2016, is a rich resource for constructive reflection on contemporary marriage and family life. For example, the exhortation includes: a collection of scripture quotes that illumine the nature and function of family life; a realistic assessment of cultural trends that challenge Christian ideals; a summary of Church teaching; helpful suggestions for a spirituality of marriage; and especially the widely praised fourth chapter on married love.

Media attention, however, focused more on controversial issues, especially communion for divorced and remarried Catholics. Pope Francis takes up that issue in a very subtle and sometimes ambiguous eighth chapter which deals with marriages that fall short of the Christian ideal. The pope describes the ideal in this way: “Christian marriage, as a reflection of the union between Christ and his Church, is fully realized in the union between a man and a woman who give themselves to each other in a free, faithful and exclusive love, who belong to each other until death and are open to the transmission of life, and are consecrated by the sacrament, which grants them the grace to become a domestic church and a leaven of new life for society” (n292). In a crucial move, the pope sees less than perfect marriages not as sinful but as partial embodiments of the ideal which are open to further development.

In the fourth chapter of the exhortation, Francis describes marriage as “the icon” of God’s love for us, which makes of the “two spouses one single existence.” The grace of the sacrament enriches the love between husband and wife, combining “the warmth of friendship and erotic passion” in an “effective union that endures long after emotions and passions subside.” No married couple actually achieves all these marital ideals. No marriage is a perfect reflection of God’s love for humanity or Christ’s love for the Church. No family is totally effective in passing on Christian teachings and values.

Theologians and scripture scholars have taught us to see the New Testament as an eschatological document which proposes ideals that will never be completely achieved in this life but only in the next life of heaven. The kingdom is already here but is not yet complete. There are signs of God’s reign in the world today but the final triumph of divine grace awaits the Parousia, the completion of Christ’s saving work. Recognizing Gospel mandates as eschatological ideals protects us against a self-righteous attitude that we are perfect, while prompting us to strive diligently to move toward the ideal. The church’s task is to help us make progress on that journey.

Pope Francis has demonstrated his pastoral genius by placing his whole discussion of marriage within that eschatological framework of Gospel ideals. While recognizing that some unions contradict the ideal, Francis insists that others “realize it in at least a partial and analagous way.” The pastoral task is to discern, name and develop the grace already at work in partial ways. The pope encourages us to follow the example of Christ who gazed with love on frail human beings, who patiently guided the Samaritan woman to “the full joy of the Gospel,” and who taught us not to cast off people but to follow “the way of mercy and reinstatement” which reaches out and welcomes all those in need. The Church should function like “a field hospital,” caring for the weakest who are wounded in the battles of life. The pastoral art is to help couples discern the next step they can take to move toward the Christian ideal of marriage.

Applying the “law of gradualness” proposed by Pope John Paul II, Francis recognizes that couples advance spiritually “by different stages of growth” as they gradually integrate the gifts of divine love and “the demands of God’s definitive and absolute love.” Pastors should enter into dialogue with couples to discover “elements in their lives that can lead to a greater openness to the Gospel of marriage in its fullness.” There is a “divine pedagogy of grace” leading couples to “reach the fullness of God’s plan for them.”

Francis applies this general pastoral approach to various “irregular situations” that fall short of the ideal. In examining “simple cohabitation,” unmarried couples living together, the pope distinguishes those who are opposed to anything institutional or definite, which is a source of concern, from those who delay marriage for economic reasons, such as the lack of a job or steady income as well as the high cost of a wedding in some countries. While recognizing that some unions “radically contradict” Gospel ideals, the pope notes that others are characterized by deep affection and the ability to overcome trials, “signs of love which in some way reflect God’s own love.” Without citing any data, Francis claims an increasing number of couples living together request marriage in the Church. Pastors should welcome all such couples, guiding them “patiently and discreetly” to “the full reality of marriage and family in conformity with the Gospel.”

Turning to divorced and remarried Catholics, Francis recognizes various situations which defy rigid classifications and call for “a suitable personal and pastoral discernment.” Some second marriages have been “consolidated over time,” with new children, proven fidelity, generous self-giving, Christian commitment.” Some individuals were unjustly abandoned in their first marriage or entered into a second marriage for the sake of the children. Others are “subjectively certain in conscience that their previous and irreparably broken marriage had never been valid.”

Given the great variety of concrete situations, Francis makes this important statement: “it is understandable that neither the Synod not this Exhortation could be expected to provide a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases.” There are no “easy recipes” to apply to diverse situations. Instead, the pope encourages “a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases, which recognizes that, since there are various degrees of responsibility, “the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same.“ As Aquinas taught, general rules identify a good which must be upheld, but the application in specific situations may vary.

Francis offers helpful pastoral advice on the process of discernment. The divorced and remarried should do an examination of conscience, asking themselves pertinent questions: how they treated children during the divorce process; did they seek reconciliation when the marriage was in trouble; what has become of their former spouse; how has their new relationship affected the rest of the family and the community; and what example is being set for young people preparing for marriage.

The pope encourages the use of what is traditionally known as “the internal forum,” which involves remarried couples entering into serious conversation with their pastor in a joint effort to discern concrete steps toward fuller participation in the life of the Church. This discernment process should always respect the “Gospel demands of truth and charity” and never give the impression that exceptions to the general rules can be easily attained or that the Church maintains a double standard. It is a dynamic process which should help form “an enlightened conscience” that can recognize “the most generous response that can be given to God” in the “concrete complexity” of a person’s limited situation.

Following the majority of Synod Fathers, Francis wants divorced and remarried Catholics to be more fully integrated into Christian communities while avoiding scandal. “They are baptized; they are brothers and sisters; and the Holy Spirit pours into their hearts gifts and talents for the good of all” (n299). Pastors should treat them not as excommunicated persons, but as living members of the Church “who deserve welcome and encouragement” along the path of life and the Gospel. “It can no longer be simply said that all those in any irregular situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace.” There may well be “mitigating factors” that limit the culpability of persons in irregular marriages; for example, affective immaturity or the force of acquired habit, as noted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Given these factors, pastors should not simply apply moral laws to the divorced and remarried, “as if they were stones to throw at people’s lives.” Rather they should enter a process of discernment which helps couples find ”possible ways of responding to God and growing in “the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church’s help to this end.” At this point, Pope Francis adds the extremely significant footnote, n351, which states: “In certain cases this can include the help of the sacraments.” Specifying the point, he reminds us that the confessional is not a “torture chamber,” but is rather “an encounter with the Lord’s mercy” and that the Eucharist is “not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.”

Lest he be misunderstood, Francis insists that dealing mercifully with irregular marriages does not undercut the Church’s proclamation of “the full ideal of marriage, God’s plan in all its grandeur.” The pope puts it this way: “To show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being.”

With that clarification, Francis once again reminds pastors to accompany with mercy and patience couples called to take steps towards the ideal of Christian marriage, treating them with compassion while avoiding harsh judgement. The pope knows some “prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion.” He believes, however, that Jesus wants pastors to enter into the complex reality of people’s lives, bringing “the balm of mercy” and “the power of tenderness.” When pastors leave their comfortable niches and meet people where they really are, their lives become “wonderfully complicated.”

Pope Francis concludes the eighth chapter by encouraging those in “complicated situations” to speak with their pastors or committed lay persons, searching for some light on the path to personal growth and their proper place in the Church.

Reactions to the pope’s approach to communion for divorced and remarried Catholics have varied greatly. Those who wanted clear rules either allowing or forbidding communion have expressed disappointment that he refused to take a stand. A number of commentators pointed out that only a relatively small number of Catholics see it as a personal concern, since most divorced and remarried have either left the Church or go to communion despite current rules. The *New York Times* columnist, Ross Douthat, a self-identified conservative Catholic, suggested that conservatives do not know how to respond to a document that “if read straightforwardly seems to introduce various kinds of ambiguity into the church’s official teaching on marriage, sin and the sacraments,” which provide “theological cover” for those in favor of a path to reconciliation and communion. Douthat identified some possible conservative responses: declare victory because the exhortation did not change doctrine; read it in light of previous church teaching and argue there is “no rupture” and “everything is fine;” question the authority of the document which is an exhortation and does not carry the same weight as an encyclical; and his own approach, which acknowledges the ambiguities in the text even though this opens the door to more liberal interpretations. *Boston Globe* columnist James Carroll, a former priest, pointed out that Francis all but explicitly opened communion to the divorced and remarried and lauded him for bringing into the light the long standing secretive practice of the “internal forum.” As Carroll recalled from his own days as a priest, couples typically talked to their pastors and prayerfully made their own decision about communion.

It seems to me that Francis has adopted a brilliant pastoral strategy that refuses to reduce morality to keeping rules and places this difficult issue in the framework of moving toward the high Gospel ideal of one man and woman in a lifelong, faithful, mutually enriching and socially beneficial relationship. By refusing to promulgate new rules, the pope encourages a more Gospel-based morality calling for prayerful discernment and fidelity to a properly formed conscience. This is not a weak compromise designed to keep from totally alienating liberals and conservatives. It is a Christ-like response by a wise pastor who understands the dynamic interplay between Gospel ideals and human limitations.

We can imagine various positive responses to the pope’s pastoral sensitivity. Some priests will find justification for their previous use of the internal forum; others will be more open to helping couples discern their position in the Church. Some divorced and remarried couples who now go to communion will be relieved of lingering guilt feelings and perhaps extend their involvement in the parish; others will be moved to talk to their pastors about participating in the sacraments. We all can learn important lessons from the pastoral wisdom of Pope Francis: maintain the high ideals of the Gospel; avoid harsh judgments of others; prayerfully discern the next step forward on our spiritual journey; and have faith in the merciful God who calls us by name and never tires of forgiving.

2195 words