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‘Amoris Laetitia’

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Amoris Laetitia

– A Reflection

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Pope Francis' latest letter of exhortation to the faithful is long and expansive, perhaps excessively so. It loops around the role of marriage and the family in the socially complex and challenging world of our time. Its purpose is to re-commit Catholics to the vocation of marriage and family life and to examine how families in difficulties and in breakdown can be healed through the Church's ministries. It is full of wise and well nuanced, sympathetic, pastoral advice which draws freely from the disciplines of psychology, counselling and sociology as well from Church teaching. In a particular way, Pope Francis discusses how integration in the life of the Church, in both its social and sacramental aspects, is an essential part of the healing process for fractured families.

What is changed from similar exhortations from his predecessors, Saint John Paul (*Familiaris Consortio*) and Pope Benedict XVI (*Deus Caritas Est*), which he quotes so extensively? One might answer a lot or a little as there is a basis for both views. Yes, Francis affirms everything the Church has always taught about marriage and family. But there is a more forceful emphasis on pastoral discernment and discretion. The Church's teaching for Francis is inspirational and aspirational, not rigorously prescriptive. Not everyone can fulfil its call to perfection. Pastoral leadership and guidance that is both understanding and respectful is a better response to people living in 'irregular' unions than throwing the rule book at them, which can be like 'throwing stones at peoples' lives'. Speaking of *Humanae Vitae*, he says natural methods of family planning should be 'promoted' (222). That does not mark a change in doctrine but it does mark a change in approach, from one that demands to one that invites. Appropriately, Francis refers to Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well and the woman taken in adultery. It is on these encounters that Francis models and indeed justifies his own pastoral approach.

Throughout the document, he is emphatic that there is no change

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in what the Church teaches. Nor is there any freedom allowed to false witness. If someone ‘wants to impose something other than what the Church teaches, he or she can in no way presume to teach or preach to others’ (297). In the exercise of pastoral discretion he cautions, ‘there can be no risk that a specific discernment may lead people to believe that the Church maintains a double standard’ (300). He is careful to point out that practical discernment in a particular case does not set any precedent as such and ‘cannot be elevated to the level of a rule’ (304). He writes, ‘a lukewarm attitude or any relativism or undue reticence in proposing the ideal would be a lack of fidelity to the Gospel’ (307). He wants no ‘watering down of the Gospel’ (311). Discernment must be ‘based on humility and love of the Church and her teaching’ (300).

He does not hesitate to set out that teaching in respect to the Church’s understanding of marriage and its purpose. Marriage as the union of one man and one woman and the unique and complementary roles of mother and father are strongly, even passionately asserted. ‘Both (mother and father) are necessary for a child’s integral and harmonious development.’ ‘Respecting a child’s dignity means affirming his or her need and natural right to have a mother and a father’ (172) He stresses that children have a need ‘for a mother’s presence, especially in the first months of life’ (173). While there may be a certain ‘flexibility of roles and responsibilities ... the clear and well defined presence of both figures, male and female, creates the environment best suited to the growth of the child’ (175). The breakdown of marriage, divorce, ‘is an evil’ (246). In the context of these remarks, Francis says he ‘values feminism’ but one that does not demand uniformity or negate motherhood. It is precisely because he recognizes their ‘feminine genius’ that he supports social equality for women which he says is ‘essential to society’.

Same sex unions are ‘not on the same level as marriage’ and are not ‘even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family’. In his discussion of pastoral approaches to irregular unions, his focus is consequently on heterosexual couples and their children. This is where questions may arise about how we are to understand the remit of mercy. Are families led by same sex couples to be accompanied also in understanding and mercy? Francis does not directly address the question but he gives us a framework within which the question may be considered. He states, ‘no one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel. Here I am not speaking only of the divorced and remarried, but of everyone, in whatever situation they may find themselves’ (297). Mercy, ‘the beating heart of the Gospel’ (309) reaches to all.

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So others too, no matter how 'far off' they may be, are called to the outstretched arms of the merciful Father, the Church represents on earth. But *Amoris Laetitia* does not leave the way open for a 'come as you are' call either. Accompaniment in compassion and understanding is along a penitential as well as pilgrim path. For instance in cases of marriage breakdown, full and frank acknowledgment of the harm caused to children and the abandoned partner are called for. There is repeated reference to the the healing power of 'the spiritual treasures of the Church and sacramental reconciliation' (204).

However, there is more than complexity involved in this exhortation. There is an unresolved tension that must be carried forward into all situations of pastoral discernment. An exhortation that urges pastors, simply put, to add mercy and stir, may be perceived to put a strain on maintaining faithful witness to the teaching of Christ and the Church. St Paul knew where the cut-off points were for him, in writing to the Corinthians. A man living with his father's wife was not tolerable within the believing community. Francis is aware too of the need 'to avoid scandal' (299). How to keep the various imperatives in equilibrium is the challenge

Mercy for Francis, is 'the beating heart of the Gospel' (309). For him, ring-fencing mercy with too many terms and conditions is the 'worst way of watering down the Gospel' (311). While mercy is for all, not just for the more deserving, there are distinctions in the approach to pastoral accompanying. Those who made 'every effort to save their first marriage and were unjustly abandoned' (298) may be more easily and readily re-integrated into the life of the faith community. But as we know from the Gospel stories of Jesus befriending sinners and the parables, it is the most notorious sinners who exemplify the reach of divine mercy, define what it is in essence. Does the reformed home and marriage wrecker then not have an equal claim to social and ecclesial inclusion?

Yet, God's mercy does not cancel out God's justice. A justice that denies mercy is not full justice. Equally, a mercy that elides too smoothly over serious offence may affront the values by which a community lives.

Shakespeare is famously known for asserting the 'unstrained' quality of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*. He had much more to say on the subject, however, that recognizes the tension between mercy and justice and public policy. It is in *Hamlet*, in the soliloquy of the villainous Claudius, that he discusses in the internal forum of conscience, the great conundrum of how one may be pardoned and yet retain 'th' offence'. Claudius does not believe repentance for his sins of adultery and murder can ever be acceptable while he still enjoys their fruits, 'my crown, mine own ambition and my

queen'. Like the divorced and re-married, he finds that undoing the wrongs he committed may damage others too and further destabilize the very institutions against which the offences were committed to begin with. On the other hand, it might look as if the sinner is personally off the hook if he is discharged from the usual obligation to make good wrongs he has caused. This is where the sinner has to find paths to reconciliation that acknowledge, in justice to the community as well as to any wronged parties, the gravity of the offence while receiving in full the healing comfort of 'the balm of mercy' (309). Reparation is not something that can always be fully private. A clear recognition of the wrongfulness of any action will determine for the individual concerned just how and in what way it is appropriate to participate in the life of the community of faith. God, as the Pope points out again, can write, and usually does, with crooked pens and there is no scandal so long as there is no confusion about where the Church stands in its teaching and preaching of the Gospel.

We know the best promoters of sobriety are alcoholics in recovery. Likewise, the Gospel is best preached by those who have a well developed sense of their own moral and spiritual frailty. The Saints have the keenest sense of their own sinfulness and are the most effective evangelizers as a result. Pope Francis is keenly aware that excluding any sinners 'who come seeking Christ' diminishes rather than strengthens the Church and its witness. It is also, as he points out, the biggest counter sign to the Gospel of mercy.

Amoris Laetitia and the Jubilee Year of Mercy have opened new doors to mercy, pastorally as well as symbolically. But the dispensation of mercy is not a primrose path but a tough walk through self-scrutiny, discernment and reconciliation with God, Church and those we have hurt.