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Vision and
Vocation of
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Vision and Vocation of the Family in *Amoris Laetitia**

Martin M. Lintner

The following paper is structured in three parts:

1. Today's profound changes in the field of marriage and family: how can and should we react to them?
2. What vision and good news has the Church to offer to spouses and families?
3. What gift do spouses and families offer to the whole Church and what is their specific vocation within the Church and for the World?

1. Today's profound changes in the field of marriage and family

There is no doubt that Western societies are currently experiencing major changes in the field of marriage and family. The realities of familial relations and models are becoming more and more diversified. The traditional family consisting of a woman and a man, who are married, procreate and educate their own children, seems, in reality, to have become a minority experience.

Therefore, in the first part of my paper I would like to consider the attitude or stance that we should adopt in confronting the challenges presented by today's profound changes in the field of marriage and the family. I will highlight different ways to react to the challenge of these transformations by naming four possible reactions.

The first reaction could be called the "deductive model". Starting from an anthropological and theological reflection on the very nature of marriage and family we can deduce some aspects and norms regarding the reality of marriage and family. The concrete marriage and family is understood primarily as a place of realization of a certain ideal or of the application of corresponding norms. If the reality does not correspond to the ideal or to the

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norms, it is seen as, and criticized as, deficient or – theologically – as sinful and therefore in need of conversion.

A second reaction may be to emphasize the ideal in a defensive mode. Also here the changing reality is seen merely negatively. It is judged to be decadent. But the primary reaction is not to accuse or damn these people and realities, but rather to defend one's own vision and ideal as the better one. The darker the surroundings are, the brighter the light of the ideal shines. The mission is to elevate the ideal in accordance with what we read in scripture: "You are the salt of the World, you are the light of the world" (cf. Mt 5:13-14). Nevertheless this reaction sometimes contains the danger to retreat into one's own seemingly intact catholic world.

A third reaction could be the attempt to change the ideal and the doctrine. If the reality changes this may have consequences on the doctrine, i.e. on the adaptation of the doctrine at the basis of the reflection on different experiences. Behind this reaction we can often find the fundamental perspective that the present state has binding force to which we need simply to adapt. Traditional doctrine is judged as old-fashioned or inopportune, in any case as incapable of offering helpful answers to the new challenges. This reaction is close to what within the Church often is lamented as "adaptation to the zeitgeist", i.e. to the spirit of the times, or as resignation in face of the reality.

There is a fourth reaction. It seems to me that this one could be described as what sometimes is called the shift of paradigm or – a little more modestly – as the new perspective of Pope Francis in *Amoris laetitia* (AL). Pope Francis says, that "there is no stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems. The situations that concern us are challenges. We should not be trapped into wasting our energy in doleful laments, but rather seek new forms of missionary creativity" (AL 57). The Pope leaves no doubt that "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" (AL 292). Even though "some forms of union radically contradict this ideal, [...] others realize it in at least a partial and analogous way. The Synod Fathers stated that the Church does not disregard the constructive elements in those situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage" (ibid.). The Pope re-emphasizes this aspect again: "In order to avoid all misunderstanding, I would point out

that in no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God's plan in all its grandeur [...] A lukewarm attitude, any kind of relativism, or an undue reticence in proposing that ideal, would be a lack of fidelity to the Gospel and also of love on the part of the Church for young people themselves. 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" (AL 307). Therefore, the Pope urges us to overcome a rigorous pastoral care by being "attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness" (AL 308) and at the same time to be merciful with the weak: "The Church's pastors, in proposing to the faithful the full ideal of the Gospel and the Church's teaching, must also help them to treat the weak with compassion, avoiding aggravation or unduly harsh or hasty judgements" (ibid.).

So, what does this fourth approach mean?

a) Firstly: While Pope Francis clearly avoids the denial of the ideal of Christian marriage and family, at the same time he affirms his conviction that some forms of familial realities which do not fully realize the Christian ideal, may realize it at least in a partial and analogous way (cf. AL 292). Of course, he admits, there are forms of familial union which radically contradict this ideal, but this does not mean that every family situation not corresponding to the ideal can be seen merely as a denial of the ideal. This means that we are required to take a differentiated and critical look at different familial realities accompanied by a basic attitude of understanding and appreciation. Referring to the Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church of Vatican Council II *Ad Gentes* (cf. AL 77) which speaks of "seeds of the Word" that can be found in other religions, the Pope interprets as such "seeds" forms of marriage and family in other religions. This means that there can be positive elements existing in these forms.

Ultimately, this theological insight can be extended to whatever familial situations people find themselves in. We must consider that there may well be "seeds of the Word", that is, positive elements that can, if not entirely justify certain situations, nonetheless in those concrete situations enable people to grow. What I am saying is that such situations, viewed with the light of faith, may contain positive elements that strengthen people humanly, morally, and spiritually. We are called by Pope Francis to acknowledge that human and moral values may be at work in such situations. To be clear: recognizing and appreciating such positive elements does not mean justifying each and every familial form. Rather, it means proposing the challenge and the task to everyone, in whatever

familial situation they find themselves, to take an initial step and to begin a process of discernment, towards greater humanization and maturation.

b) A second aspect: Pope Francis is convinced that human fragility and even sins are not insurmountable obstacles to the acting of the Holy Spirit or to the presence of God's grace. In *AL* 297 he quotes the *Relatio Synodi 2014*, where the Synod of Bishops affirmed: "In considering a pastoral approach towards people who have contracted a civil marriage, who are divorced and remarried, or simply living together, the Church has the responsibility of helping them understand the divine pedagogy of grace in their lives and offering them assistance so they can reach the fullness of God's plan for them", and he adds: "something which is always possible by the power of the Holy Spirit".

Francis knows that every couple (and ultimately every human being) is called to continuous growth in grace (cf. *AL* 134). It is noteworthy that he stresses the action of God's grace amid human limitations, fragility, inadequacy, failure, and sin. His starting point is not an idyllic view of a perfect family, as we see from the way he begins his reflections in *AL* with a meditation on Psalm 128: "The idyllic picture presented in Psalm 128 is not at odds with a bitter truth found throughout sacred Scripture, that is, the presence of pain, evil and violence that break up families and their communion of life and love. For good reason Christ's teaching on marriage (cf. Mt 19:3-9) is inserted within a dispute about divorce" (*AL* 19).

c) A third aspect follows. "The word of God is not a series of abstract ideas but rather a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties or suffering" (*AL* 22). As Church who proclaims the Gospel of the Family as an integral part of its mission, we have to ask ourselves how to proclaim this Gospel as a source of comfort, help, and companionship in the very specific and concrete needs, difficulties, and sufferings faced by families. In the *Relatio Synodi 2014* the Bishops speak of "reading both the signs of God and human history" (cf. Nr. 3). This process of reading and listening finally has shaped the method of the Synods of Bishops in 2014 and 2015: Firstly "listening, so as to look at the reality of the family today in all its complexities, both lights and shadows", secondly "looking, our gaze is fixed on Christ to ponder, with renewed freshness and enthusiasm, what revelation, transmitted in the Church's faith, tells us about the beauty, the role and the dignity of the family", thirdly "confronting the situation, with an eye on the Lord Jesus, to discern the ways in which the Church and society can renew their commitment to the family founded upon the marriage between a man and a woman" (cf. Nr. 4).

Let me conclude this first part of my paper with a quotation from the *Relatio Synodi 2015*. How shall we face the challenges that represent the reality of so many and differing real-life situations in families today? The Bishops expressed a kind of self-commitment: “We want to look at this reality with the same eyes with which Christ looked at it, as he walked among the people of his time. We want our attitude to be one of humility and understanding. Our desire is to accompany each and every family so that each family might discover the best way to overcome the obstacles it encounters” (Nr. 56).

The Bishops in the Synod 2014 used the allegory of a “beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among the people”: Thus “the Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence, like the beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among the people to enlighten those who have lost their way or who are in the midst of a storm” (*Relatio Synodi 2014*, Nr. 28, quoted in *AL* 291).

Following this first part I would like to reflect on the Gospel of the Family according to *AL*. In Latin the expression “*Evangelium familiae*” can be read either as *genitivus objectivus* or as *genitivus subjectivus*. As *genitivus objectivus* it refers to the Gospel, i.e. to the good news and message that the Church has to offer to the families, as *genitivus subjectivus* it means that the families are themselves a good message, a Gospel for the whole Church. They have to offer to the Church good news. In other words: “The Church is good for the family, and the family is good for the Church” (*AL* 87).

2. *What vision and what message of Good News has the Church to offer to families?*

First of all, the most important point of reference of *AL* is the Holy Scripture. The document appeals to the Bible’s teaching. As it has been already mentioned, *AL* makes it quite clear that the ideal of marriage is understood as covenant of love and fidelity, marked by a commitment to exclusivity and stability (cf. *AL* 66; 34). However – also this has already been mentioned – this ideal “is not at odds with a bitter truth found throughout sacred Scripture, that is, the presence of pain, evil and violence that break up families and their communion of life and love” (cf. *AL* 19).

2.1 *Marriage as a kind of salvation history*

You may have heard the saying: “God writes straight with crooked lines”. This is the first bit of good news for families: Their daily realities are places of God’s acting even though these are also realities of fragility and brokenness. God’s acting and His presence

do not depend upon the idealistic realization of marriage and family life. The power of grace will carry on to completion the good work that God began in the spouses (cfr Phil 1:6). The sacrament of marriage is basically an experience of salvation, “a gift given for the sanctification and salvation of the spouses, since their mutual belonging is a real representation, through the sacramental sign, of the same relationship between Christ and the Church” (AL 72). The spouses are permanent reminders and witnesses of salvation, of God’s love, faithfulness, and mercy for one another as well as for their children. “Marriage is a vocation, inasmuch as it is a response to a specific call to experience conjugal love as an imperfect sign of the love between Christ and the Church” (AL 72). It is significant that AL at one hand speaks of an “imperfect sign” of Christ’s love and of “analogy between the human couple of husband and wife, and that of Christ and his Church” (cf. AL 72-73). On the other hand, this allows us to include the whole common life of a couple and a family. Each of the human experiences that belong to conjugal and familial relationships have the potentiality to be transformed into experiences of salvation if they are lived in the spirit of love and mutual self-giving. Living together, loving each other, struggling together, hurting the partner, asking for forgiveness, forgiving each other etc. can be transformed into a path of growth in the life of grace for the couple and their family and give them “here on earth a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb” (AL 73). Pope Francis therefore calls the marriage “a kind of salvation history” (cf. AL 221). Indeed, the “Lord’s presence dwells in real and concrete families, with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes.... The spirituality of family love is made up of thousands of small but real gestures. In that variety of gifts and encounters which deepen communion, God has his dwelling place.” (AL 315). “Showing love ..., bestowing happiness, soothing hurts and sharing life together represents a true path of sanctification. Love is always a gift of God” (AL 228).

2.2 Discover and announce the grace of marriage

Pope Francis affirms that, “indeed, the grace of the sacrament of marriage is intended before all else to perfect the couple’s love” (AL 89). In the last chapter, dedicated to the issue of spirituality of marriage and family, he explains what he means by sanctification and the experience of salvation: a daily mystical growth into a deeper union with God, a growth in openness of heart and thus to an ever fuller encounter with the Lord (cf. AL 316). “Moreover, moments of joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection. Married couples shape with different daily gestures a God-enlightened

space in which to experience the hidden presence of the risen Lord” (*AL* 317).

What does this mean for us as Church? We have to announce the grace of marriage. We have to make comprehensible in a new way what the grace of marriage is! Very self-critically, *AL* states: An “excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God’s grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite. We have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life. We find it difficult to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfillment than as a lifelong burden” (*AL* 36-37). We have to find new paths to proclaim and to offer the healing power of grace and the light of the Gospel message. We must not “indoctrinate” that message, turning it into dead stones to be hurled at others (cf. *AL* 49).

2.3 Marriage as a lifelong project of human and spiritual growth

God’s grace acts in the daily life of spouses and families and includes all the human experiences and all the dimensions of conjugal love for this love is above all fully human, a compound of sense and spirit (cf. Paul VI, *HV* 9). This ongoing acting of God’s grace at the same time reminds us “that marriage is not something that happens once for all. [A couple’s] union is real and irrevocable, confirmed and consecrated by the sacrament of matrimony. Yet in joining their lives, the spouses assume an active and creative role in a lifelong project” (*AL* 218). It is like an “unfinished product, needing to grow, a work in progress” (*ibid.*). The conjugal life, far from being anything selfish or calculating, is “a common project, putting the other’s happiness ahead of my own, and realizing with joy that this marriage enriches society” (*AL* 220). It belongs to this understanding of marriage to recognize that love has to mature and that “this process occurs in various stages that call for generosity and sacrifice” (*ibid.*). The daily exercise of mutual love, “is thus a kind of craftsmanship” (cf. *AL* 221). It is like an art that has to be practiced and learned day by day. Pope Francis uses the impressive allegory of the “fine wine that matures with age” when he affirms: “It is not helpful to dream of an idyllic and perfect love needing no stimulus to grow. A celestial notion of earthly love forgets that the best is yet to come, that fine wine matures with age. It is much healthier to be realistic about our limits, defects and imperfections, and to respond to the call to grow together, to bring love to maturity and to strengthen the union, come what may” (*AL* 135).

The Church must therefore accompany the spouses in these various stages in order to respond to the very specific needs, challenges and questions of spouses in different moments of their conjugal life: preparing the marriage, the first years of the marriage, the responsibility of overseeing the growth and education of their children, the challenge of rediscovering themselves as partners, i.e. as wife and husband after the adult children have left the family etc.

Recognizing the process of both human maturation and spiritual growth requires a gradualness in pastoral care to identify elements that can foster evangelization and human and spiritual growth in every phase of marriage, and beyond that, in every form of relationship. The so-called “law of gradualness” means that the human being “knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth” (AL 295; cf. FC 34). This requires “a gradualness in the prudential exercise of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law” (AL 295). Elsewhere AL speaks of “seeds that are still waiting to grow” (AL 76) and of positive and constructive elements that the Church should not disregard, but foster and strengthen in the sense of the divine pedagogy (AL 78). By “divine pedagogy” Pope Francis means seeing things with the eyes of Jesus who “looked upon the women and men whom he met with love and tenderness, accompanying their steps in truth, patience and mercy as he proclaimed the demands of the Kingdom of God” (AL 60).

In Chapter VIII, where Pope Francis refers to so-called “irregular” or “complex” situations, he proposes the following three steps: accompany, discern, and integrate fragility. This approach, however, is of relevance to any conjugal and familial relationship. The Pope makes clear that this approach is not only a kind of pastoral care, but also a form of spiritual direction. Especially with regard to moral and spiritual discernment he reminds us that the Church possesses a solid body of reflection. Francis is encouraging spouses in difficult situations to speak confidently with their pastors or with other lay people whose lives are committed to the Lord (cf. AL 300, 312). This requires at the same time on behalf of the Church a commitment to train and to qualify priests and lay people to offer this service of human, pastoral, spiritual accompaniment and direction to spouses and families.

3. What good message do spouses and families offer to the Church?

3.1 Families are the “image and likeness” of the Trinity

Families are good for the Church because “in the human family,

gathered by Christ, ‘the image and likeness’ of the Most Holy Trinity (cf. Gen 1:26) has been restored, the mystery from which all true love flows” (*AL* 71). Starting with a theological interpretation of the biblical creation story, Pope Francis emphasizes that a “couple that loves and begets life is a true, living icon [...] capable of revealing God the Creator and Saviour” (*AL* 11). This motif of the relationship between human families and the divine Trinity is repeated several times, e.g.: “fruitful love becomes a symbol of God’s inner life” (*ibid.*); “the couple’s fruitful relationship becomes an image for understanding and describing the mystery of God himself, for in the Christian vision of the Trinity, God is contemplated as Father, Son and Spirit of love” (*ibid.*); “the triune God is a communion of love, and the family is its living reflection” (*ibid.*). Francis at this point quotes Saint John Paul II who said: “Our God in his deepest mystery is not solitude, but a family, for he has within himself fatherhood, sonship and the essence of the family, which is love. That love, in the divine family, is the Holy Spirit. In the human family, gathered by Christ, ‘the image and likeness’ of the Most Holy Trinity (cf. Gen 1:26) has been restored, the mystery from which all true love flows” (*ibid.*). When Pope Francis speaks of the family as “domestic Church”, the Trinitarian dimension returns as well: “Within the family ‘which could be called a domestic church’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 11), individuals enter upon an ecclesial experience of communion among persons, which reflects, through grace, the mystery of the Holy Trinity” (*AL* 86). In the Chapter on the Spirituality of marriage and family *AL* says that “the Trinity is present in the temple of marital communion” (*AL* 314) and that the familial love that is welcoming others and reaching out to others, as every kind of social love, is a reflection of the Trinity and therefore reveals the spiritual meaning of family (cf. *AL* 324).

The family, therefore, is related to God’s very being and has a deep Trinitarian dimension. Here we can find the theological foundation of the sacramental nature of marriage, the proper reason why Saint Paul relates the couple to the “mystery” of the union of Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5:21-33) (cf. *AL* 11).

Of course, from a doctrinal point of view we have to beware not to overburden the sacrament of marriage. The analogous character of the sacrament has always to be taken into account. But, at the same time, the very human love of free and mutual self-giving brings together the human and the divine (cf. *AL* 125; *GS* 49). God’s revelation in Scripture is not a revealing merely of information about God’s inner life, but it took place through historical encounters with God who is present and acts in human lives, histories, relationships etc. Relationships and families are

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like a school of acceptance, forgiveness, fidelity, maturing. In this sense, they become a kind of mystical experience of encounter with God and Christ in the dynamism of the Spirit who is the loving bond between Father and Son. According to Scripture, the inner-Trinitarian mystery is revealed through God's loving and healing presence in the concrete lives of people. It is revealed in and through human and existential experiences of love, fidelity, failure, mercy, forgiveness, fecundity, fruitfulness, hope etc. It follows therefore that these human experiences become a *locus theologicus*, i.e. a theological place of a deeper encounter with God and a way of better understanding of His mystery. Marriage and conjugal love, understood in its human and loving dynamic as a symbol of God's inner life, are therefore an important supplement to theological reflection enabling us to understand God's nature as a loving community of persons.

3.2 Families bear witness to the Gospel of God's love

Families are a precious gift for the Church because they bear witness to the Gospel of God's love and of Christ's total self-gift on the cross. "The married couple are [...] a permanent reminder for the Church of what took place on the cross; they are for one another and for their children witnesses of the salvation in which they share through the sacrament" (AL 72). Therefore, "the experience of love in families is a perennial source of strength for the life of the Church" (AL 88). Love is always fruitful and the fruits of conjugal and familial love are of benefit to the whole Church and society. In this sense AL emphasizes: "In this love, they [spouses] celebrate their happy moments and support each other in the difficult passages of their life together ... The beauty of this mutual, gratuitous gift, the joy which comes from a life that is born and the loving care of all family members – from toddlers to seniors – are just a few of the fruits which make the response to the vocation of the family unique and irreplaceable, both for the Church and for society as a whole" (AL 88).

3.3 Families are "domestic Churches"

AL takes up the concept of "domestic Church" present already in *Lumen gentium*, 11: "The family is, so to speak, the domestic church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care vocation to a sacred state."

As domestic Church the family is first of all a place of presence of Christ (cf. AL 15) and his loving relationship to God, his Father. Therefore, "within the family ... individuals enter upon an ecclesial

experience of communion among persons, which reflects, through grace, the mystery of the Holy Trinity” (*AL* 86).

In the conjugal love and mutual self-giving of spouses and family members, Christ’s love, fidelity, and self-gift acts and its healing power can be experienced. Consequently, “it is important that people experience the Gospel of the family as a joy that ‘fills hearts and lives’, because in Christ we have been ‘set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness“ (*AL* 200).

A further aspect of families as “domestic Church” is that they are “the principal agents of the family apostolate”(ibid.). Parents are the first witnesses and announcers of the Gospel and Christian faith for their children, first of all through the concrete experience of parental love, but also through celebrating Sunday worship, Christians feast throughout the year and moments of prayer like an evening prayer or a blessing of the meal.

As “domestic Church” families are small Christian communities within the Church, but also within society. *AL* emphasizes the important role of Christian families for the whole of society: “The family is thus an agent of pastoral activity through its explicit proclamation of the Gospel and its legacy of varied forms of witness, namely solidarity with the poor, openness to a diversity of people, the protection of creation, moral and material solidarity with other families, including those most in need, commitment to the promotion of the common good and the transformation of unjust social structures, beginning in the territory in which the family lives, through the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy” (*AL* 290).

Consequently, Pope Francis says that families are “both domestic churches and a leaven of evangelization in society” (*AL* 290); and again: “a domestic church and a leaven of new life for society” (*AL* 292). The Pope calls the family also a “vital cell for transforming the world” (*AL* 324) and recognizes that families are not only open to life by generating life within itself, but also through their social commitment: “When a family is welcoming and reaches out to others, especially the poor and the neglected, it is a symbol, witness and participant in the Church’s motherhood” (ibid.). The different forms of social commitment are concrete forms of realization of a family’s spirituality. It is significant that the understanding of a family as “domestic Church” includes a vocation of the family both for the Church and for society as a whole.

4. Summarizing remarks

1. *AL* invites us to change our perspective on families. First of all this means to look at the reality of families with the same eyes with which Christ looked at it and to assume an attitude of

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humble understanding. The Synod of Bishops 2015 in the closing document wrote: “We want to look at this reality with the same eyes with which Christ looked at it, as he walked among the people of his time. We want our attitude to be one of humility and understanding. Our desire is to accompany each and every family so that each family might discover the best way to overcome the obstacles it encounters” (Nr. 56)

2. Therefore, the doctrine of marriage has to be proclaimed not as a moral burden, but as a human, social, and spiritual value. Marriage is a gift for the spouses, it offers a special grace and helps spouses and families on their journey towards sanctification. It can be transformed into an experience of salvation and therefore become a form of salvation history. It is the mission and responsibility of the Church to make this evident and capable of being experienced not only through its teaching, but also in human, pastoral, and spiritual accompaniment and direction.

3. Marriage and the family is a precious gift for the Church and for society as whole. Through their daily experiences of love, self-giving, forgiving ... spouses and families become a way of deeper and better understanding of the mystery of God who is a loving communion of persons. Families are the first place of experience of human and God’s love and for witnessing the Christian faith. Families are a “domestic Church”, a presence of Christ, and through different forms of social commitment and love they have also the vocation to transform society for the better.

Praying the Rosary. Pope Francis reminded us in Fátima (in 2017), quoting Blessed Paul VI, ‘If we want to be Christian, we must be Marian’. Francis then said, ‘Each time we recite the Rosary, in this holy place or anywhere else, the Gospel enters anew into the life of individuals, families, peoples and the entire world’.

– NIGEL WOLLEN, *Learning to Love*, (Dublin: Veritas) p. 19.