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Amoris Laetitia
and Christian
Marriage

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*Amoris Laetitia*¹ and Movements for Christian Marriage

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I recall in the early 1980s discussing with a Lecturer in Theology in Boston College the then state of the Church. Her research and teaching focussed on how to increase lay involvement in the Church's mission. She asked me about the local Church in South Co. Dublin. I told her with some pride that there were 9 parishes within a 10 to 15 minute radius of Ballyboden (Dublin), where I live, with an average of 3 priests per parish. Within a somewhat wider radius there were 9 flourishing male religious orders – Augustinians, Carmelites, Dominicans, Jesuits, Marists, Mill Hill Fathers, Servites and White Fathers. Female religious orders included Dominican, Good Shepherd, Loreto, and Mercy sisters. Her response surprised and concerned me. She said that these numbers of clergy and religious were not sustainable and, based on her USA experience, were likely to reduce significantly in the decades ahead. She also said that from her research this relatively high proportion of clergy and religious often led to passivity among lay people. For example, as Pope Francis has pointed out recently one result of this was that many lay people considered that “religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven, (EG 182). Back then it was common to refer to them as ‘Sunday Catholics’ with their faith having little real impact on their daily lives. Another outcome was that few felt any real sense of responsibility for the Church's mission, did not see the need to educate themselves as adults in the faith or were given the opportunities to do so.

DECLINE IN CHURCH PRACTICE AND VOCATIONS

The predictions made by my friend over 30 years ago on the Church in Ireland are currently being realised, and made considerably

1 References to *Amoris Laetitia* from now on will given in the text as *AL* plus paragraph numbers in brackets. The same approach will apply to references to *Evangelii Gaudium* with references given as *EG* plus paragraph numbers in brackets.

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worse by the various scandals and a biased media. There has not only been a steep fall in vocations to the priesthood and religious life, but arguably also in relation to marriage, as a sacrament, and to passing on the faith in families. Pope Francis concedes that “in recent decades there has been a breakdown in the way Catholics pass down the Christian faith to the young. It is undeniable that many people feel disillusioned and no longer identify with the Catholic tradition” (EG 70). He reminds us that “Lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the People of God. The minority – ordained ministers- are at their service. There is growing awareness of the identity and mission of the laity in the Church” ... (but not) in the same way in all places.(EG102). Obstacles to the mission of the laity, he points out, can be lack of effective formation and “an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision making” (EG102). It is a daunting task for the Church to turn around these developments and it won’t happen in a matter of years or for many of us in our lifetimes. However, it is stated in the Gospels that when Jesus “saw the crowds he felt sorry for them because they were harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples “the harvest is rich but the labourers are few, so ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers to his harvest” (Mt:35 to 37). Many in the crowds today, especially in families, are “harassed and dejected”. But there are in my experience many ‘labourers’ for the harvest among lay people, especially in many active lay movements.

EQUIPES NOTRE DAME – TEAMS OF OUR LADY

I and my wife, Grace, are members of one such movement, Equipés Notre Dame, (Teams of Our Lady).² This is a Christian movement for married couples who are committed to strengthening their relationship with each other and with God. It originated in 1939 when its founder, Fr Henri Caffarel, in responding to married couples in a parish in Paris who wished to live out their sacrament of marriage, told them ‘The demands of holiness concern you. In order to respond to them, you have a sacrament. Let us seek together’. It is not a Marian movement as such, but primarily dedicated to nurturing Christian marriage. Its members had to keep a low profile during the Second World War but much was being done quietly to develop the movement. In 1947 Father Caffarel was able to promulgate the Charter of the Teams of Our

2 The brief description of Teams of Our Lady which follows is mainly taken from a presentation the author made at the World Meeting of Families, Morning Programme, Session 2 Friday, 24th August under the heading: Dancing to the Future with Hope – Strengthening Marriage & the Family today. More detailed information on Teams is available on the following websites: Ireland: www.equipes-notre-dame.ie, UK: www.teamsgb.org.uk. International: www.equipes-notre-dame.com

Lady on December 8th in the Crypt of the Church of St. Augustin, Paris. Under the guidance of Fr Caffarel the movement developed a conjugal or ‘married spirituality’ as ‘a path to holiness’ for married couples’. It is integrated into the married and spiritual life of its members. The various aspects of this married spirituality are called ‘endeavours’. As the name implies, they require continual effort and dedication. The reward for couples is a strengthening of their marriage and their spiritual and family life.

THE ENDEAVOURS

Broadly there are 5 interlinked endeavours. A key endeavour particularly related to married life is for a couple to make time regularly, at least an hour once a month, away from distractions, simply to talk to each other about their life and relationship. This is called a ‘sit down’. (taken by Fr Caffarel from the reference in Mk.16:20, (after the Ascension), “(Jesus) sat down at the right hand of God”). Couples share their hopes, joys, concerns, fears, and the ways they may be failing each other in their relationship. Pope Francis (*AL*) devotes 6 paragraphs (136 to 141) to Dialogue which is central to the ‘sit down’. For Teams they are among the most thumbed sections of *Amoris*.

A related endeavour involves couples making time available, through daily prayer, for their relationship with God. They find that openness to each other as a couple greatly helps them to be open to God in individual prayer and vice versa. Pope Francis says that ‘a few minutes can be found each day to come together before the living God to tell him our worries, to ask for the needs of our family, to pray for someone experiencing difficulty, to ask for help in showing love, to give thanks for life and for its blessings, and to ask Our Lady to protect us beneath her maternal mantle.’ (*AL* 318) We talk to God in prayer, but we also need to listen to his Word through regularly reading and meditating on Scripture. This is the third endeavour which involves setting time aside, daily if possible, to read and listen to the Word of God and particularly how it relates to one’s marriage and family relationships. Arising from individual prayer and contemplating the Word of God comes devotion to praying together as a couple and a family. There is also a strong commitment to attendance at Mass at least weekly and participation in the other sacraments.

A fourth endeavour is a ‘rule of life’ that is followed for at least a year. This is based on discerning some aspect of life or a habit members would like to change. It might relate to their marriage, spiritual life, health eg losing weight, and so on. Couples draw much of their discernment and determination to follow the rule from their communication with their spouse and their Teams. A

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final endeavour involves doing a one/two day Teams retreat each year. This involves talks, reflections on their married and spiritual life and discussions on these with their spouse and the group on the retreat. It provides a great opportunity to take stock of their lives and discern where they are going into the future with their relationships with each other and with God.

THE TEAM

Through this “married spirituality” in Teams couples try to live out and witness to their sacrament. But they need regular support in doing so. Much of this is derived from their own Team. Each couple is part of a Team comprising ideally 5 couples and a chaplain. That is why the movement is called Teams. Couples meet once a month, except for July and August, over a meal in each other’s homes. They share the main happenings in their lives, progress and difficulties with the endeavours. There is prayer and scripture reading. They also make time to discuss a Study Topic usually on marriage, family and their spiritual life. *Amoris Laetitia* has been a recent major study topic for Teams worldwide. Invariably couples in their Team become very close and supportive of each other, especially during times of difficulty. This is one of the movement’s great strengths.

TEAM CHAPLAINS

The Chaplains, usually priests, are key members of Teams and add greatly to its strength. They not only provide much valued spiritual guidance, but in sharing their own pastoral experience give the married members a clear, ongoing, understanding of the challenges the Church is encountering. They in turn acknowledge that they learn much about the everyday realities of marriage and family life from their own involvement in Teams. Pope Francis states that “ the presence of lay people, families and especially the presence of women in priestly formation. promotes the appreciation of the diversity and complementarity of the different vocations in the Church.” (*EG* 203). The involvement of priests as chaplains in Teams can, in our experience, greatly help with this formation.

GROWTH OF TEAMS

The creation of Teams of Our Lady and its continued growth worldwide has corresponded to the growing realisation that married life cannot remain enclosed in the spouses’ relationship. It is now recognised as being inseparably linked to the life of the Church and that this ecclesial life is expressed through the experience of life in the Teams. Teams are now present in 92 countries on 5 continents. There are currently at least 60,000 couples, 9,342 priests and

852 spiritual counsellors in Teams worldwide. These comprise up to 13,575 teams and 150,000 individuals. The movement is continuing to grow, especially in Africa and South America. There is a worldwide gathering of Team members every 6 years. The most recent one took place last July in Fatima at which 9,000 attended, including 15 from Ireland. Membership is open ended. Grace and myself, for example, have been members for over 25 years..

FR HENRI CAFFAREL

The founder Fr Henri Caffarel has had a major influence on recognising the seminal importance of marriage or married spirituality and its development in Teams and the wider Church. This influence was brought to bear in Vatican II and with Popes during his lifetime. The following brief quotations give some indications of his thoughts and vision. “ This is the great truth to be spoken about and proclaimed: it is what all (people) hunger and thirst for. They need to discover that they are loved, that they are loved with a love that can never be discouraged.”. He continually stressed the importance of prayer and the difficulties in praying. “And then afterwards, I realised that talking about God is so difficult! We must do more, we must do it better, we must invite people to experience God”. In a talk on “ Teams of Our Lady and Atheism” in Rome in 1970, he referred to the witness of couples seeking God. “Your couple will bear witness to God, in an even more explicit fashion, if it is the union of two seekers of God, according to the admirable expression in the Psalms. Two seekers, whose intelligence and hearts are eager to know, meet God and be united to him, because they have understood that God is the great reality, because they are interested in God above all else.”.

The process for the beatification of Fr Caffarel is underway and the whole Teams movement is behind it, especially through prayer.

POPE FRANCIS AND TEAMS

Pope Francis met the leadership of Teams in September, 2015 and the following passage from his address emphasises what he sees as the Teams’ missionary role.

Indeed, I would like to insist on this missionary role of the Teams of Our Lady. Every committed couple certainly receives a great deal from its Team experience, and its conjugal life is deepened by refining itself through the spirituality of the Movement. However, after receiving from Christ and from the Church, a Christian is irresistibly sent out to witness to and pass on what he has received. “The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized” (EG 120). Christian couples and families are often the best placed to proclaim Jesus Christ to other

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*families, to support, fortify and encourage them. What you live as couples and as families – accompanied by the very charism of your Movement – the profound and irreplaceable joy that the Lord enables you to feel in domestic intimacy in joy and sorrow, in the happiness of your spouse's presence, in the growth of your children, in the human and spiritual fruitfulness that He grants you, all this is to be witnessed to, proclaimed and communicated outside so that others, in turn, may set out on this path.*³

The Teams International Leadership has taken full account of the Pope's message. In a document⁴ given by the International Responsible Team to Teams of Our Lady at the Gathering in Fatima last July (2018) on its vocation and mission going forward, it is stated that "Teams' cannot limit themselves to an individualistic spirituality but have to realise a pastoral perspective that is essential for the transformation of the world. Its mission, therefore, is to shape, train and motivate couples to be messengers of the Good News in the world in which we live, so as to proclaim the values of the Gospel at the heart of the couple and the family. In addition to living out their sacrament, it is envisaged that the mission of Teams for the years ahead will include becoming more active in education and the transmission of faith, in (the) preparation for marriage and its accompaniment, in supporting couples in crisis and couples who have formed a new relationship, in support for the elderly, and in spiritual reflection and its accompaniment.

TEAMS IN IRELAND

Teams were introduced to Ireland in 1963, 55 years ago, by John and Bernadette Blaney. Bernadette is a native of France. Sadly John died last June. After this length of time many Bishops and priests are still just hearing of Teams now, thanks to the work of the Bishops' Council for Marriage and the Family and its Executive Secretary, Fr Peter Murphy. It also shows that Teams and other ecclesial movements have not been particularly successful in making their existence and charism widely known. Pope Francis points out in relation to these movements that "frequently they bring a new evangelising fervour and a new capacity for dialogue with the world whereby the Church is renewed. But it will prove beneficial for them not to lose contact with the rich reality of the local parish and to participate readily in the overall pastoral activity of the particular Church. This kind of integration will prevent them from concentrating only on part of the Gospel or the Church, or becoming nomads without roots." (EG 29). The mission of

3 Speech of Pope Francis to Leaders of Teams of Our Lady, Rome, 10 September, 2015. Online reference: http://w2.vatican.va/.../speeches/papa-frnacesco_20150910

4 <http://equipres-notre-dame.com/en/documentation>

the Movement for the coming years, briefly summarised above, shows how conscious the leadership of Teams is of the concerns of Pope Francis and how much they are in line with the vocation and mission he envisages for the laity. These include (*AL* 229) “meetings of couples living in the same neighbourhood, brief retreats for couples, talks by experts on concrete issues facing families, ... and desires, ... programmes of spiritual growth, ... and family meetings.” Other possibilities cited include the mentoring of younger married couples.

SUPPORT FOR TEAMS AT PARISH LEVEL

However, Teams like other ecclesial movements, especially here in Ireland, are affected by the fall off in Church practice and commitment. They are struggling to attract younger couples. Priests, especially at parish level, may be able to provide crucial support. In the course of their pastoral ministry they may come across couples who might be suitable for Teams and refer them on. Team couples are also a real resource for parishes and have much to offer in the various activities mentioned above. A major feature of the World Meeting of Families and, previously, the 2012 Eucharistic Congress, were the Exhibitions comprising Church related organisations and movements. There were up to 300 stands at the World meeting. Among these were virtually the full range of ecclesial movements. Consideration could be given perhaps to organising these regularly at even parish level, with the various movements coming together to host them.

LEGACY OF WORLD MEETING

What will be the legacy of the World Meeting of Families 2018 and the visit of Pope Francis to Ireland? It could include recognising and encouraging movements, such as Teams of Our Lady, that support Christian Marriage and family life, to grow and flourish, especially at parish level. Pope Francis has pointed out that ‘The Synod Fathers emphasised that Christian Families, by the grace of the sacrament of matrimony, are the principal agents of the family apostolate, above all, through their joy-filled witness as domestic churches’ (*AL* 200). A key “new pastoral method” (*AL* 199) could involve priests and religious supporting and working with Teams of Our Lady and similar such lay movements at parish level in giving ongoing effect to the vision of *Amoris Laetitia – The Joy of Love*. This, especially in Ireland, could also be a significant part of the legacy of the World Meeting.