

Keys to reading *Amoris laetitia*

A New Light on Moral Theology

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Published five years ago, the Apostolic Exhortation Amoris laetitia tackles many questions about human love and family life from a fresh perspective and its approach has sometimes encountered misunderstanding and even opposition. Yet, it is not a question of a break with Tradition but rather a developing and deepening. The author, who studied moral theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University (Rome), now coordinates the Hildesheim (Germany) pastoral diocesan office. He is known in German speaking countries for his publications on the way of being Church in today's world.

The genesis of *Amoris Laetitia*

Pope Francis set out a clear agenda in 2014 when he announced a Synod on The Pastoral Challenges for the Family in the Context of Evangelization. Although initially many failed to notice, he envisaged that the chosen methodology would put into question the usual universal synodal procedures. Local Churches were invited to ask people and families about the concerns and challenges of families today. It was an existential approach that took the *sensus fidelium* seriously.

At first it looked like business as usual - collect data for the Episcopal Conference that would then set out a series of ideas to bring to the Synod. But Francis meant something else: He wanted the widest possible participation of the people of God.

After a first moment of uncertainty and bewilderment, we started working in our diocese. Given time deadlines, we launched online consultations and were amazed at the result. Individuals, couples and associations 'involved' in the church responded.

What came out in their contributions was a clear divergence between the magisterium's teaching and lived practice. Their well-considered submissions in line with the message of the Gospel surprised us. All this demonstrated to us how the bold challenge launched by *Gaudium et spes* is still relevant today. It calls for the signs of the times to be interpreted in a manner "intelligible to each generation' (n.4). It is not enough to repeat an 'eternal' teaching. A constant learning process is needed.

Does the Church learn her evangelical doctrine in a constantly new way? This is exactly how the Council saw it: 'With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age and to judge them in the light of the word of God. In this way, revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage' (n.44).¹

It is therefore a matter of understanding the Gospel more deeply. It continues to unfold through what happens in each epoch and enables it to be more fully proposed. This was the intention of the Synod on the Family: a new evangelization.

A synodal process!

But...can we turn to a synodal process in matters of morality? Can its doctrines be dealt with that way? These seemed the crucial questions when the 2014 Synod work began. It faced strongly opposing positions. But precisely here – this was the Pope’s idea – it was a matter of learning from the synodality inherent in the Church’s very nature. At other times, things were handled differently. Everything seemed clear: the eternal truth of God, revelation – including moral questions of course – were handed on by the apostles and ordained ministers who then taught them objectively and hierarchically to the people to be faithfully adhered to or find themselves in a state of sin and therefore excluded.

This paradigm, which we may call ‘instructionist,’ was then superseded by the Second Vatican Council and more specifically by the theology of revelation proposed in *Dei Verbum*: the first teaching to be held is that God reveals himself and addresses human beings in human language and as a friend. It should be noted that this paradigm shift has not, up to now, found an adequate application: neither in the moral area nor in evangelization. It is enough to think of catechesis that is still be carried out as ‘instruction.’

Instead, synodality takes God’s friendship with us seriously and seeks its realization in ecclesial communion. It was not by chance the Pope conceived of the Synod on the family as a two-year process. Synodality transcends individual positions. It sets out in search of acquired truth when all are listening, in search mutual understanding and open to allowing themselves to be surprised. This was why the Pope’s October 2015 discourse on synodality in the Paul VI Hall insisted on the need to learn to be a synodal Church that seeks the truth that comes to meet us.

I want to be clear: I’m not speaking about taking a wrong turn on doctrinal authenticity but of understanding it more deeply in the present context. This is not watering down. Rather it is a discovering of God’s plan for today by listening to a world that is Catholic, that has not lost the faith despite being in the midst of constant ambiguities. It expresses the growing grasp of the truth to which the Spirit is leading us.

It is about discerning but already during the Synod we were often confronted with the old paradigms of eternal law and its application, on the presumed betrayal of doctrine and on the question of how doctrine unfolds in a way that can make the Gospel shine out today (and that is the ‘Truth,’ to use John Paul II’s words). The real point of the question, then, is not whether we are moving away from the evangelical doctrine but according to which theological paradigm we are looking at revelation and therefore at the Gospel’s teaching.

A first conclusion

Before entering into a specific discussion of *Amoris laetitia* we will try to draw some conclusions. The conflicts over content certainly concern moral questions and ways of proclaiming the Gospel today, but at the origin of these conflicts there are some basic issues: what is meant by ‘truth’ when we take account of the historicity of Christian revelation? Do we limit God’s plan in relation to man and woman, to truth and sin, if we give space to synodality and to the *sensus fidelium*?

Different approaches of moral theology handle revelation and its truth from different perspectives. The classic approach works from a Christian context, beginning from the eternal truth of moral laws and then 'applies' this in history, seeing the sacrament of penance in the same way. A synodal approach sees itself on a journey towards the truth. It does not deny the Church's experience and the truth already discovered, but moral truth is not simply 'applied,' rather, it is found in reading the signs of the times and is thus enriched over time since it unfolds throughout the centuries.

This also effects how moral truth is translated in practice: it remains valid but as knowledge of truth increases and is enriched, so too every moral situation which does not correspond to evangelical truth cannot be fitted into a logic of right or wrong (being 'inside' or 'outside'). Rather, it will encounter in the truth a light for finding a way. It is worth saying that truth does not exclude but directs a person towards growth in the fullness of true life.

The Christological context

Perhaps the underlying Christology is even more decisive for this framework. Ultimately, this approach is based on a Paschal Christology – that is to say, one which has its roots in the Crucified and Risen Christ and in his truth about the human person, which is a truth in process: through night and death to life. It is based on a theology of Paschal mercy: it is Christ who passionately grafts himself into the history of each person. It is he who reaches each human being, who takes on the weight of every sin and becomes the way towards life. It is Christ who wants to heal the wounds and bring everything to life wherever they may be found.

Reading *Amoris Laetitia* – a morality founded in Christian existence

An attentive reading of the post-synodal exhortation can discover this theological architecture that is then made concrete and put into practice. *Amoris laetitia* does not betray the radicality of love and the high idealism of the reality of creation and the union of man and woman. It does not betray the ideals of Christian morality but takes account of the discovering process in its journey in history. It opens a new understanding of Christian morality which seriously takes account of the journey Christ undertakes with every human being who, created by God, desires this ideal of life.

As a result, it is not pastoral activities which are limited to applying moral truth but one which begins from an eschatological conception of moral teaching: morality as the root, guiding star and attractive goal that considers the situation of the human person. In this way, the existential dimension comes into play. While in classic morality this dimension occurs in the casuistry employed in the sacrament of penance, the *cura animarum* here consists in the experience of a life journey leading to the experiential discovery of a full life in communion with the Church – open to each human person in every situation: 'Many people feel that the Church's message on marriage and the family does not clearly reflect the preaching and attitudes of Jesus who set forth a demanding ideal yet never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery' (AL 38).

This approach integrates not only the ideal written in the heart of each person created by God, but also in his or her fragility and wounded nature. The Pope is very clear on this:

'Here I would like to reiterate something I sought to make clear to the whole Church, lest we take the wrong path: "There are two ways of thinking which recur throughout the Church's history: casting off and reinstating. The Church's way, from the time of the Council of Jerusalem, has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement...The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone forever; it is to pour out the balm of God's mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart...For true charity is always unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous"' (AL 296, quoting the Synod's final report).

Pope Francis is quite aware that this approach can be misunderstood: 'I understand 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, a Mother who, while clearly expressing her objective teaching "always does what good she can, even if in the process, her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street"' (AL 308, quoting *Evangelii gaudium*).

This is the key: Mercy, rooted in the Paschal mystery, marks the starting point in the historic journey of salvation of every human being, every couple, every situation. We are encouraged to challenge one another to embark on a path of discernment to arrive at a new and full communion, one that occurs within the painful fragility of every human life.

¹ This process requires that the Church be a constantly learning community. See sentences prior to quotation: 'Just as it is in the world's interest to acknowledge the Church as a historical reality, and to recognize her good intentions, so the Church herself knows how richly she has profited by the history and development of humanity. The experience of past ages, the progress of the sciences, and the treasures hidden in the various forms of human culture, by all of which the nature of man himself is more clearly revealed and new roads to truth are opened, these profit the Church, too. For, from the beginning of her history she has learned to express the message of Christ with the help of the ideas and terminology of various philosophers, and and has tried to clarify it with their wisdom, too. Her purpose has been to adapt the Gospel to the grasp of all as well as to the needs of the learned, insofar as such was appropriate. Indeed this accommodated preaching of the revealed word ought to remain the law of all evangelization. For thus the ability to express Christ's message in its own way is developed in each nation, and at the same time there is fostered a living exchange between the Church and the diverse cultures of people (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 13). To promote such exchange, especially in our days, the Church requires the special help of those who live in the world, are versed in different institutions and specialties, and grasp their innermost significance in the eyes of both believers and unbelievers. (GS 44).