



Pastoral for Family

"The Christian proclamation on the family is good news indeed". (AL 1)

Accompanying, discerning and integrating weakness

Amoris Laetitia - Chapter VIII

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INTRODUCTION

The Chapter VIII of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* is an invitation to mercy and pastoral discernment in situations that do not fully respond to what the Lord proposes to us in the Gospel.

The Pope uses three very important verbs "to accompany, discern and integrate", fundamental to face fragile, complex or irregular situations. As we read this chapter, "let us not forget that the Church's task is often like that of a field hospital" (291).

The Pope confirms what a Christian marriage is, and adds that other forms of union radically contradict this ideal, but some realize it at least in a partial and analogous way. Therefore, "the Church does not disregard the constructive elements in those situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage" (Cf. AL 292).

A. GRADUALNESS IN PASTORAL CARE

To face the situations that the Church considers "irregular": civil marriage, distrust marriage and live together, putting off indefinitely the commitment of marriage, while yet others break a commitment already made and immediately assume a new one; situations that are often chosen by culture and generalized mentality, it is necessary to "enter into pastoral dialogue with these persons is needed to distinguish elements in their lives that can lead to a greater openness to the Gospel of marriage in its fullness" (Cf. AL 293).

To accompany these various situations with patience and tenderness, it is necessary to appeal to the principle of gradualness. "This is not a "gradualness of law" but rather 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..." The Pope invites us to take into account the theme of "the law of gradualness" that John Paul II had already underlined, in the knowledge that the human being "knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth". The law "is not a yoke imposed on men" but "is itself a gift of God which points out the way" for all and whose demands are gradually being integrated (Cf. AL 295).

B. THE DISCERNMENT OF "IRREGULAR" SITUATIONS

The Pope says that "to avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situations" and "to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition". And he continues: "It is about integrating everyone" (Cf. AL 296). It is a matter of reaching out to everyone, of needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community and thus to experience being touched by an "unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous" mercy (Cf. AL 297).

The divorced who have entered a new union, for example, can find themselves in a variety of situations, which should not be pigeonholed or fit into overly rigid classifications leaving no room for a suitable personal and pastoral discernment (298).



Next, the Pope affirms that "the baptized who are divorced and civilly remarried need to be more fully integrated into Christian communities in the variety of ways possible, while avoiding any occasion of scandal " (Cf. AL 299). "Such persons need to feel not as excommunicated members of the Church, but instead as living members, able to live and grow in the Church. "This integration is also needed in the care and Christian upbringing of their children, who ought to be

considered most important" (Cf. AL 299).

If the innumerable diversity of concrete situations is taken into account, it can be understood that a new general legislation applicable to all cases should not be expected from this Exhortation. A new stimulus is only needed for responsible personal and pastoral discernment in particular cases, which recognizes that, since "the degree of responsibility is not the same in all cases", the consequences or effects of a norm do not necessarily have to always be the same".

"...this discernment can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity, as proposed by the Church..." For this discernment to happen, the following conditions must necessarily be present: humility, discretion and love for the Church and her teaching, in a sincere search for God's will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it". These attitudes are essential for avoiding the grave danger of misunderstandings (Cf. AL 300).

C. MITIGATING FACTORS IN PASTORAL DISCERNMENT

The Pope assures that the Church possesses a solid body of reflection concerning mitigating factors and situations. Hence it is can no longer simply be said that all those in any "irregular" situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace. A subject may know full well the rule, yet have great difficulty in understanding "its inherent values" or be in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to act differently and decide otherwise without further sin. Factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision" (Cf. AL 301).

"The Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly mentions these factors: "imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors". For this reason, a negative judgment about an objective situation does not imply a judgment about the imputability or culpability of the person involved. On the basis of these convictions, I consider very fitting what many Synod Fathers wanted to affirm: "Under certain circumstances people find it very difficult to act differently. Pastoral discernment, while taking into account a person's properly formed conscience, must take responsibility for these situations. Even the consequences of actions taken

are not necessarily the same in all cases” (Cf. AL 302).

“Recognizing the influence of such concrete factors, we can add that individual conscience needs to be better incorporated into the Church’s praxis in certain situations which do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage. Naturally, every effort should be made to encourage the development of an enlightened conscience, formed and guided by the responsible and serious discernment of one’s pastor, and to encourage an ever greater trust in God’s grace. Yet conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one’s limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal. In any event, let us recall that this discernment is dynamic; it must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized” (Cf. AL 303).

D. RULES AND DISCERNMENT

The Pope develops in depth the demands and characteristics of the journey of accompaniment and discernment in a profound dialogue between the faithful and pastors. To achieve this, he calls the Church's attention to "the conditioning and mitigating circumstances" in terms of the imputability and responsibility of the actions, and relying on Saint Thomas Aquinas, he dwells on the relationship between "norms and discernment" stating that". It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations. At the same time, it must be said that, precisely for that reason, what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule (Cf. AL 304).



“...a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties” (Cf. AL 305).

Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God (Cf. AL 305).

E. THE LOGIC OF PASTORAL MERCY

In order to avoid all misunderstanding, the Pope pointed out that: “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. Today, more important than the pastoral care of failures is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus to prevent their breakdown” (Cf. AL 307).

On "the logic of pastoral mercy," Pope Francis emphatically states that: “At times we find it hard to make room for God’s unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel’ (Cf. AL 311)

The general meaning of this Chapter and of the spirit that Pope Francis wants to inscribe in the pastoral care of the Church is well summarized in the last words: “I encourage the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors or with other lay people whose lives are committed to the Lord. They may not always encounter in them a confirmation of their own ideas or desires, but they will surely receive some light to help them better understand

their situation and discover a path to personal growth. I also encourage the Church's pastors to listen to them with sensitivity and serenity, with a sincere desire to understand their plight and their point of view, in order to help them live better lives and to recognize their proper place in the Church" (AL 312).

The logic of mercy must permeate all pastoral action. It is a matter of not judging beforehand, but of gathering all the sheep, as Jesus himself wanted (cf. AL 309). This climate "prevents the development of a cold bureaucratic morality" and invites "pastoral discernment impregnated with merciful love, which always tends to understand, forgive, accompany, hope and above all integrate" (Cf. AL 312). The Church is not a "custom", but the living testimony of fraternal charity which is the first law of Christians. Neither lax nor rigorous, this position of the Pope - which sometimes takes the form of self-criticism - is very important for the pastoral implementation of the Church's rules in both moral and sacramental matters. This invitation to trust on the part of the faithful and to loving listening on the part of pastors is undoubtedly more demanding than a more rigid pastoral, but which corresponds to the dynamics of the Gospel. The Pope insists: "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 (Cf. AL 308).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Pontiff calls us to change our gaze and to get out of prejudices, to further develop compassion, love and mercy towards our brothers and sisters who are going through "irregular" situations. "The mission of the Church is to announce God's mercy and open its doors to the hearts of all, without excluding anyone" (Cf. AL 308). Today, the objective of the Church is to strengthen marriages and prevent ruptures (Cf. AL 307). This Chapter eight is the result of a concrete experience with people who know what a family is and what it means to live together for many years.

REFLECT AND SHARE:

1. After reading the text, let us have a resonance of the phrases that caught our attention.
2. According to what the Church says: *"The divorced who have entered a new union, for example, can find themselves in a variety of situations, which should not be pigeonholed or fit into overly rigid classifications leaving no room for a suitable personal and pastoral discernment.. We know that there are no "easy recipes" (Cf. AL 298).*
 - Discuss the way in which "irregular" situations are managed in our community and parish context. To what conversion are we invited and invited to make, to better welcome and integrate our brothers and sisters?
3. The Pope speaks about the need to "integrate everyone" and evokes the commitment to this integration: "May each one feel worthy of God's love." "The first thing is to know that you are lovable".
 - What passage(s) of the Gospel remind us with these words of our Holy Father?