

Pope Francis' Revolution of Mercy: Amoris Laetitia as a New Paradigm of Catholicity

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Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to be with you this evening. I welcome this opportunity to contribute in some small way to the important work of this institute.

“...curiosity about Catholicism is at an all-time high in Pope Francis’ pontificate.” I did not write those words. They appear on the webpage introducing the goals of the Von Hügel Institute. That growing curiosity in Catholicism, the site explains, is spawned by a recognition that Pope Francis is tapping into a yearning the Institute is attempting to address, namely the need for a worldview of reality, a catholic - with small c - view, that connects all aspects of knowledge and practice in a differentiated unity, offering a needed corrective in an era when pressures of specialization and commodification have left work and knowledge so fragmented.

I was intrigued by how the aims of the Von Hügel Institute are so easily associated with those of Pope Francis. At the least that should signal to a wider audience beyond the Catholic Church that he just may have something to say to them, especially if they are seeking a more holistic worldview. But, this appreciation of Francis also serves as an invitation to Catholics to take a fresh look at his agenda and come to see that he is introducing a more holistic approach to being church, one that more fully unites what we know and practice in our tradition in order to better respond to the realities people face in their daily lives.

In a recent interview with Cardinal Parolin, the Holy See’s Secretary of State, he was asked about the difficulties some seem to have in understanding the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. He responded that the Holy Father is offering a new paradigm in this document, one that calls us to embrace a new spirit, a change of direction in the way the Church carries out its ministry, especially ministry to families. At the heart of this shift is a fully incarnational approach, which the Cardinal explains, is a two-way street. On the one hand the Church embraces the family with the Gospel message. Yet, since the family is already itself a Gospel, the Gospel of the family, there is a reciprocity to this incarnational approach that recognizes the contribution that families make to the Church’s understanding and proclamation of the Gospel. In other words, there has to be a holistic connection between our knowledge and our practice, our ideas and our experience have to inform each other.

With all that in mind, I am going to address two topics tonight. First, it is important to understand that Pope Francis is not offering this new approach, this new paradigm for family ministry in a vacuum. In Chapter 2 of *Amoris*, he makes the case that the complex realities that couples and families face today are singularly different from those of the past. If that is true, then a Church that claims in the opening lines of *Gaudium et Spes* to be “truly linked with humanity and its history by the deepest of bonds,” cannot ignore this contemporary situation. A fresh approach is needed, one that is holistic and catholic. In fact, as I will note in my conclusion, I am convinced that some people misinterpret and misunderstand *Amoris* simply because they fail or refuse to take into account the present reality in all its complexity.

In the second half of my presentation I will build off of Cardinal Parolin’s observations, by pointing out where I believe a paradigm shift takes place in *Amoris*. The Pope does this, I will argue, on a number of levels through a set of interrelated interpretive principles. This allows him to offer a new and holistic response for family ministry. Following up on his appeal for a revolution of mercy, launched with the Jubilee Year, Pope Francis is both inviting and equipping the Church through this new hermeneutic to take up this mission in a new, imaginative, and, yes, holistic way, especially as it relates to her ministry to couples and families.

I. The Present Reality

Pope Francis is convinced of the need for a new ministerial approach to families as he looks at the challenges facing families in today’s world. His description of the present reality in chapter 2 of *Amoris* relies heavily on the worldwide consultation of the faithful and the deliberations of the bishops at the 2014 and 2015 synods on marriage and family. He masterfully puts on full display the complex web of still developing social, cultural, and economic realities in which families live. This situation, so different from the past, has created uncertainty as people take up the challenges of marriage and raising a family. The fact that family life has changed so significantly, he notes, cannot be ignored.

While Pope Francis amply covers the many factors that have created this new reality for family life, it is sufficient to highlight here just one example. For instance, consider how many of the former social support systems families have relied on for transmitting values and traditions have all but evaporated.

Robert Putnam writes about the impoverishment of social capital in his groundbreaking work *Bowling Alone*. His research shows that there are many factors that have led to this impoverishment of social capital, leaving people increasingly disconnected from family, friends and neighbors. One of the factors is increased mobility, which Pope Francis emphasizes. Globally, people today are on the move, many forced to flee for their lives in the midst of violence and famine. Others relocate to find meaningful work that pays a living wage. Being detached from the support system that earlier sustained and nourished people personally, economically and socially puts significant stresses on all families, no matter their educational or income level. Both parents often feel forced to work to provide adequate and affordable childcare, while also meeting basic family needs. Less time is available for family life, let alone community life. Wives and mothers are particularly impacted in this situation. In addition to the fact that they traditionally have lacked equal access to employment and are paid less than men

for comparable work, the burden of domestic chores often falls to women, so they are doubly stressed.

The lack of a family support system particularly impacts young people, who, for a variety of reasons, often feel pressured to delay marriage and yet are deprived of a value system their family life provided. As a result, delaying marriage leads young persons to cohabit, sometimes without a firm commitment to marriage. This brings its own set of issues, particularly related to commitment and healthy interpersonal growth.

Similarly there is a breakdown of other community based support systems. For instance, adult children are left to fend for themselves as they struggle to care for elderly family members or those with special needs. Moreover, deprived of these societal resources, families are unable to access cultural activities and participate in the life of the broader community, both of which are important to living a full and rich life.

Of course, none of this even begins to take into consideration the harm brought about by the alienation and isolation created from this impoverishment of social capital, such as drug abuse and violence. Nor have we even touched on the seismic shifts in society, whether that be secularism, technology, globalization and terrorism, which affect marriages and families.

But, this one example gives us a glimpse of how family life today is so dramatically different from the past, leaving many people disoriented and uncertain about their lives to the point that the Church must find a new way to minister to them. Yet, we also have to admit, that in spite of the loss of so much social capital, parents and married couples have developed new strategies to fill the gaps. They have assumed greater responsibility for their personal lives and the care and development of their families.

With all of this in view, Pope Francis proposes a new response for the Church's approach to families. It begins with a healthy dose of self-criticism, readily admitting where the Church has fallen short. But, he also makes clear that in view of the new challenges families face today, there must be significant shifts in the way we approach and think about our ministry to families. *Amoris* is nothing short of the Holy Father's call to action, in which he summons Church leaders, both lay and clergy, to enter into a serious dialogue about how best to minister to couples and families in a way that is faithful, honest and creative. All of this will involve thinking about marriage more holistically on a number of levels.

II. A New Hermeneutic

The new challenges of family life outlined above call for a new response from the Church. The bishops gathered at the synods on the family were united in this regard, in the end voting for all the proposals by over a 2/3 vote and in most cases nearly unanimously. In response to the bishops, Pope Francis offers in *Amoris Laetitia* a new way of relating to the lives of families today by introducing a set of hermeneutical principles. These principles are deeply rooted in Scripture and Tradition and yet are profoundly attentive to the dynamics of marriage and family life in the contemporary world. These principles of interpretation, six in all, force a paradigm shift, allowing us to re-envision the Church's engagement with couples and families and open a

pathway for doing so. As I discuss each one of them, I will also make some observations about their implications for the Church's renewed ministry.

1. The Family is a Privileged Site of God's Self-Revelation

"The Gospel of the family spans the history of the world." *Amoris Laetitia* 64

With these words, Pope Francis draws attention to a truth that courses through the scriptures. God has chosen the family as a privileged place to reveal how God acts and relates to humanity and the world.

This insight has enormous consequences. If we are serious about fully appreciating that the concrete lives of families and couples are part of salvation history in which God continues to engage and redeem humanity, then at the least it will mean moving away from presenting an abstract and idealized presentation of marriage. Instead, we should begin with a view that married life is "...a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems" (AL 38). Likewise, if we accept that families are a privileged place of God's self-revelation and activity, then no family should be considered deprived of God's grace. Our ministerial approach should begin with the understanding that families are not problems to solve. Rather, they are opportunities for the Church to discern with the aid of the Spirit how God is active in our time and what God is calling us to do here and now.

It is not solely in the glimpses of perfection that families may reveal the presence and action of Christ to the Church. Perhaps even more often they reveal Christ's action in their imperfect attempts at love and compassion, which permeate ordinary life (AL 57, 113). "The Lord's presence dwells in real and concrete families, with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes," the pope explains (AL 315). In fact, Pope Francis, relying on observations of the synod participants, affirms that the manifestation of God's self-revelation is not restricted to those who meet the Church's marital ideals. It can be found in "true natural marriage" and in "the forms of marriage found in other religious traditions, even if at times obscurely" (AL 77). He also admits the possibility of God's grace working in those involved in second marriages: "... it 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." (AL 301).

In all these ways, Pope Francis reminds us that the family is such a privileged place for God's self-revelation that nothing can stand in the way of God's grace. The presupposition must always be that whenever there is a family striving to live together and to love one another, the Spirit is already present. The task of those who minister to families, then, is to open their eyes to see, and to help families discern where God is calling them. All of this represents an enormous change of approach, a paradigm shift holistically rooted in scripture, tradition and human experience.

2. The Synodal Church Accompanies Families by Balancing Teaching and Learning

The first interpretive principle leads directly to the second. Because families are a privileged place of God's self-revelation and action in the world, there needs to be a shift in the way the Church's ministers interact with families and married couples. It should be marked by a mutual

respect for the movement of the Spirit. Ministers must accompany families in a process of discernment. They must always do so by maintaining a balance between teaching and listening, so that all remain open to the possibility of learning from one another in seeking to understand the mystery of God together.

Thus, in a genuinely synodal Church there is no hierarchical distinction between those with knowledge and those without. As such, the most important consequence of this call to accompaniment ought to be greater attention to the voices of the laity, especially on matters of marriage and family life, for they live this reality day to day. This is the way a synodal Church acts (1).

It goes without saying that this will also mean rejecting an authoritarian or paternalistic way of dealing with people that lays down the law, that pretends to have all the answers, or easy answers to complex problems, that suggests that general rules will seamlessly bring immediate clarity or that the teachings of our tradition can preemptively be applied to the particular challenges confronting couples and families. In its place a new direction will be required, one that envisions ministry as accompaniment, an accompaniment, which we will see, is marked by a deep respect for the conscience of the faithful.

Certainly, the Church, ever faithful to the Great Commission of Matthew 28, will always need those who teach. This is why Pope Francis maintains, “In no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God’s plan in all its grandeur” (AL 307). After all, “the great values of marriage and the Christian family correspond to a yearning that is part and parcel of human existence” (AL 57). The Church can, indeed must, be true to the teachings we have received, and so bishops, ministers, and theologians should be ready to instruct, as those who accompany married couples and families.

But, it is always an accompaniment that involves a process of listening and learning, that “guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God” (AL 300). Accompaniment requires the sensitivity of a spiritual director or a close friend who can listen to the experiences of another humbly, not pretending to have all the answers, and always ready to help discern the movements of the Spirit in that particular moment.

But, the accompaniment also is an act of forming Church teaching. There is a continuum of accompaniment which undergirds this entire range of actions by the Church. And thus, as will be discussed below more fully, the core goal of formal teaching on marriage is accompaniment, not the pursuit of an abstract, isolated set of truths. This represents a major shift in our ministerial approach that is nothing short of revolutionary.

3. The Consciences of the Faithful are Essential in the Task of Discernment

The mutual respect in discerning the movement of the spirit in the process of accompaniment opens up a third shift, that provides a more complete understanding of the role of conscience. Rather than limiting the function of conscience to knowing moral truth about actions in the past and objective truth in the present, conscience also discerns the future, asking: What is God asking of me now? This is how Pope Francis explains it:

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. (AL 303).

The starting point for the role of conscience in the new hermeneutic is *Gaudium et Spes* 16 (2), which identifies conscience as “the most secret core and sanctuary of a man...(where) he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths.” When taken seriously, this definition demands a profound respect for the discernment of married couples and families. Their decisions of conscience represent God's personal guidance for the particularities of their lives. In other words, the voice of conscience—the voice of God— or if I may be permitted to quote an Oxford man here at Cambridge, what Newman called “the aboriginal vicar of Christ”—could very well affirm the necessity of living at some distance from the Church's understanding of the ideal, while nevertheless calling a person “to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized” (AL 303).

In view of this, the Holy Father encourages pastors numerous times throughout the exhortation to exercise careful discernment. Pastors, properly trained and sufficiently familiar with the particular circumstances of those involved in this process of discernment are to take into account the complexity of various situations (AL 79).

It is hard to overstate the significance of this hermeneutical shift. By fully embracing the understanding of conscience found in *Gaudium et Spes*, Pope Francis points not only to the possibility of accompaniment in the Church's ministry with families but also to its necessity.

4. The Church's Understanding of God's Plan for Marriage Must Incorporate the Insights of the Faithful

A logical consequence of the first three paradigm shifts is the need for the Church to incorporate the insights of the faithful not just generally, but specifically into teachings about marriage and family. If, as the pope observes, the aim of Church teaching is “to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfillment than as a lifelong burden” (AL 37), then there can be no better teacher for the Church than the faithful who actively walk this path of personal development.

From their experience, we quickly learn that we have much work to do together. “Many people,” the pope acknowledges, “feel that the Church's message on marriage and 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” (AL 38). Pope Francis calls us to listen to these concerns with a welcoming heart, and to take responsibility for the shortcomings that have led to these types of conclusions. As noted above, the pope himself reminds us, “At

times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families” (AL 36).

The most appropriate remedy, of course, is to attend to the concrete situations of real families, inviting the lay faithful to help the whole Church understand and promote marriage and family life as a source of true fulfillment. We can no longer treat the Church’s vision for marriage as “dead stones to be hurled at others” (to use Pope Francis’s colorful terminology), but must instead see it as a living tradition that comes to its fullest expression through a dynamic process of reflection and development over time. With the insight of those who constantly navigate the tensions between the abstract ideal and its actual manifestation, we will have the resources necessary to articulate the divine plan for marriage and family in a way that inspires hope rather than despair at the awareness of what they currently are not (3).

5. Accompaniment that Attends to the Pastoral and Local while Upholding the Doctrinal and Universal Concerns

As a consequence of creating space for the work of prudence in the Church’s ministry of accompaniment, a fifth paradigm shift is required on two levels. First, when dealing with particular cases, a pastoral – and not merely doctrinal approach - is needed. This approach must recognize that people “...can find themselves in a variety of situations, which should not be pigeonholed or fit into overly rigid classifications” (AL 298). Acknowledging “the immense variety of concrete situations,” the pope calls for “a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases, one which would recognize that, since ‘the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases,’ the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same” (AL 300). The result is not relativism, or an arbitrary application of the doctrinal law, but an authentic receptivity to God’s self-revelation in the concrete realities of family life and to the work of the Holy Spirit in the consciences of the faithful. As pastoral discernment attends to the reality of a situation, the conscience based Christian moral life does not focus primarily on the automatic application of universal precepts. Rather, it is continually immersed in the concrete situations which give vital context to our moral choices. Here the Holy Father makes a unique contribution to understanding the role of conscience in the discernment process.

In fact, the real shift towards a pastoral approach involves creating a culture of care, hospitality and tenderness in the parish community on behalf of those who have been wounded. In the particular case of those in second marriages, pastors must “allow them not only to realize that they belong to the Church as the body of Christ, but also to know that they can have a joyful and fruitful experience in it 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 and experience her as a mother who welcomes them always, who takes care of them with affection and encourages them along the path of life and the Gospel” (AL 299).

Likewise, there has to be a balance between universal and local concerns. The pope stresses the importance of local variation in our global Church. “Not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by the interventions of the magisterium” (AL 3), the pope states. Indeed, as pastors attend to the distinct needs of the persons in front of them with all the

complex matters of family life, “Different communities will have to devise more practical and effective initiatives that respect both the Church’s teaching and local problems and needs” (AL 199). But, while admitting that different cultural realities call for different pastoral conclusions, this is not to suggest that the existence of widely varying teachings among regions (or dioceses) is a positive element in Church life. This is still a dilemma that needs further attention and study lest we end up with opposing magisterial directives even within regions that share a similar culture and realities in family life.

In this regard, Pope Francis has now offered a pathway forward with the publication in *Acta Apostolica Sedes* of his letter to the bishops of Buenos Aires and their pastoral, which confirms that their interpretation of *Amoris* authentically reflects his mind as being official Church teaching. It will now be up to all in the Church, particularly the hierarchy, to respond in a spirit of affective and effective collegiality with the Successor of Peter, ever keeping in mind paragraph 25 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (4).

6. The Doctrinal Can Develop through the Pastoral as the Gospel of Mercy Informs the Ministry of the Church

This final shift is the result of resituating mercy at the heart of the Gospel to the point that “we should always consider ‘inadequate any theological conception which in the end puts in doubt the omnipotence of God and, especially, his mercy’” (AL 311). From the earliest days of the Church there have been two approaches “casting off and reinstating. The Church’s way, from the time of the Council of Jerusalem,” the Holy Father insists, “has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement” (AL 296).

In fact, the Church’s pastoral practice of accompanying others in mercy should inform and shape doctrinal development. “The teaching of moral theology should not fail to incorporate these considerations” (AL 311), Pope Francis urges, as they “emphasize and encourage the highest and most central values of the Gospel.” In other words, doctrinal development is about remaining open to the invitation to see our moral teachings on marriage and family life through the lens of God’s omnipotent mercy. This proper relationship between the Church’s experiences of pastoral accompaniment and doctrinal development is the linchpin that holds together the other hermeneutical principles. Doctrine can develop as a result of the Church’s merciful accompaniment of families because God has chosen the family as a privileged place to reveal all that the God of mercy is doing in our time. To deny this, the Holy Father warns, would make us guilty of the “worst way of watering down the Gospel” (AL 311).

Conclusion

As I said at the outset, the project of the Von Hügel Institute has given me a chance to take a second look at what Pope Francis is offering in *Amoris*, for which I thank you. Without a holistic approach to examining the questions of the day, one that connects knowing and practice, we end up with a fragmented and partial way of understanding and knowledge, which limits our practice. What emerges from this re-reading of *Amoris* is that the Holy Father is offering a revived hermeneutic that involves a paradigm shift on a number of levels. He does that by connecting tradition and experience, teaching and practice in a way that better responds to the realities

people face in their daily lives. I say “revivified,” since the word “new” is not quite accurate. In reality, Pope Francis is retrieving a way of thinking about Church teaching and practice that has its root in our tradition.

This study also convinces me that the failure to take a holistic approach in the examination of questions related to marriage and family life has led some critics to misinterpret and misunderstand *Amoris*. Instead of actually attending to the present reality of people’s lives today in all of its complexity, they limit their scope to an idealistic understanding of marriage and family. They also fail to see how the various issues related to marriage and family life are connected to each other, treating them instead as discrete questions. As a result, they narrow their options when it comes to responding to the lived realities of people’s lives, since their knowledge is fragmented and incomplete.

Pope Francis presents these interpretive principles specifically as a means to enable ministers in the Church to decipher more reliably and realistically the experiences of people in modern family life. Yet, I believe they give further evidence of the importance of “thinking in the round, seeing all of reality through its underlying unity, in the etymological sense of catholic...”, that “enables fresh conversations and new directions, all geared towards the common good.”

Again, not my words, but those of your institute. Thank you.

1) Pope Francis develops this understanding of ministry in a synodal Church in his Address marking the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops. As all the baptized are anointed, he states, the proclamation of the Gospel is not something “to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and an *Ecclesia discens*, (a teaching Church and a learning Church) since the flock likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church.

2) Conor Kelly situates this understanding of conscience in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, particularly in *Gaudium et Spes* 16. He writes, “By taking this conciliar idea seriously, *Amoris Laetitia* significantly advances the magisterial understanding of conscience, representing another step in an ongoing process of development and reclamation of the tradition that has been active in the Church since Vatican II”. Conor M. Kelly, “The Role of the Moral Theologian in the Church: A Proposal in Light of *Amoris Laetitia*,” *Theological Studies* 77 (2016) 922–48. Kelly refers to David DeCosse, “The Primacy of Conscience, Vatican II, and Pope Francis: The Opportunity to Renew Tradition,” in *From Vatican II to Pope Francis: Creating a Catholic Future*, ed. Paul Crowley (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014) 156–69

3) It is worth noting that St. Pope John Paul II shared this conviction about the need for the hierarchical Church to be unafraid of learning from the members as a means of fostering within the Church a spirituality of communion. In calling for spirituality of communion within the Church he noted that “...we need to make our own the ancient pastoral wisdom which, without prejudice to their authority, encouraged Pastors to listen more widely to the entire People of

God....(As) Saint Paulinus of Nola urges: “Let us listen to what all the faithful say, because in every one of them the Spirit of God breathes”. While the wisdom of the law, by providing precise rules for participation, attests to the hierarchical structure of the Church and averts any temptation to arbitrariness or unjustified claims, the spirituality of communion, by prompting a trust and openness wholly in accord with the dignity and responsibility of every member of the People of God, supplies institutional reality with a soul.” *Novo millennio ineunte*, 45. Pope Francis is now suggesting that a similar involvement by the laity is needed in supplying the institutional reality of our teaching with a soul.

4) Among the principal duties of bishops the preaching of the Gospel occupies an eminent place. For bishops are preachers of the faith, who lead new disciples to Christ, and they are authentic teachers, that is, teachers endowed with the authority of Christ, who preach to the people committed to them the faith they must believe and put into practice, and by the light of the Holy Spirit illustrate that faith. They bring forth from the treasury of Revelation new things and old, making it bear fruit and vigilantly warding off any errors that threaten their flock. Bishops, teaching in communion with the Roman Pontiff, are to be respected by all as witnesses to divine and Catholic truth. In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent. This religious submission of mind and will must be shown in a special way to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*; that is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will. His mind and will in the matter may be known either from the character of the documents, from his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or from his manner of speaking. *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 25