

SOME NOTES ON THE BOOK

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In the book, Tom Rausch and I thought of bringing into relief, with the collaboration of many colleagues, new theological and ethical dimensions that are clearly at work in Pope Francis' recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*. There is no denying the continuity of the document in question with previous church statements. Still, because continuity is not a rigid uniformity, one should realize that the doctrine of the church remains always hospitable to developments, if not radical shifts in paradigms. As I mention in my conclusions to the book, *Amoris Laetitia* throws into relief three important elements: the stress on the dialogical nature of the church, the openness to a more nuanced sexual anthropology, which, in turns, grounds a richer understanding of both marital sacramentality and moral subjectivity, and, finally, a model of moral normativity defined by the centrality of discernment in the integration of contextual dimensions.

First, the dialogical nature of the church is reflected in Pope Francis' frequent appeal to the work of the Bishop synods, which, in turn, nourishes the content of the Exhortation; its constant reference to the experiences of local churches; and its attempt to articulate the gospel of love for our times by way of a careful interpretation of the contemporary situation of marriage and family. The "gospel of love," does not come down from heaven, a ready-made textbook simply available for judicious application; it is, rather, the honest articulation of a communal discernment, requiring the work of empirical reason, no less than the insight of faith-inspired understanding. The approach of *Amoris Laetitia* is clearly inductive, rather than deductive;

integrative, rather than exclusivist; sensitive to the plurality of voices, rather than fixed on the clarity of a univocal refrain.

Secondly, the portrayal of sexual anthropology entailed by the document is worth noting: building on phenomenological attentiveness to the nuances of human experience, it conveys a picture of the person mindful of the complexity of self-appropriation, the centrality of growth, and the importance of development in the definition of sexual identity. Thus, the emphasis on the normativity of sexual ideals is tempered by the recognition that the journey toward a perfect love cannot be embarked upon without adequate attendance to the fallibility of human beings, a realistic assessment of their moral capacity, and the encouragement to persevere in the adventure of constant learning. Only a realist account of the human condition (*conditio humana*) can open up the space for a deeper recognition of the work of grace, the gift of the Spirit effecting, in the sacramental economy, the glorious destiny promised to the poverty of the flesh.

In the end, a renewed attention to the centrality of conscience, and a more concrete picture of the moral subject, emerge from such anthropology: the moral subject is not an abstract agent, but an incarnate actor, not an appendix in the description of the moral event, but a central point of reference in the formulation of moral judgment. The importance of conscience formation, itself premised on mindfulness of the church's teachings, calls spouses to the silence of prayer, and the honesty of transparent dialogue; in turn, it reminds pastors of the need to listen, and the *finesse* required by careful discernment.

Finally, the question of whether the Exhortation signals a change in doctrine was raised, in the wake of its publication, by the media, and by commentators less attuned to the nuances of magisterial developments. Clearly, no changes have occurred, as far as the church's commitment to fundamental teachings: indissolubility of sacramental marriage, the centrality of

love and procreation in marriage, the relevance of gender difference, the inability of homosexual unions to express the reality of a sacramental bond, etc. For sure, Pope Francis seems to convey a different attitude toward so called “irregular situations” of those who live outside the space envisioned by the canonical law: but to be outside the norm is not to be outside the church. Whether changes *might* ensue in the future, at the level of a concrete articulation of moral norms, remains to be seen.

The strategies for “conscientious decision making” articulated by *Amoris Laetitia*, the law of gradualness, the distinction between objective morality and subjective culpability, and the relation between general norms and concrete situations, point in the direction of something like a *praxis* of pastoral accommodation. Is such a strategy sufficient? Or will the very premises upon which the strategy is based call for further developments in the formulation of the normative system itself? Let the answer be left open for now, entrusted to hope for dialogue within the church, and to the “work of love” that “enables us to hear without sounds and to see the unseen” (AL 255).