

The embrace of otherness



Theologians and bishops gathered in Rome last week to reflect on the thorny issues of love and sexuality ahead of this year's major meeting on marriage and relationship.

In the current climate of polarisation in both the Church and society, any attempt to differentiate approaches to the pressing questions of our time risks being denounced by one side or another. Some argue that either the doctrinal tradition of the Roman Catholic Church is preserved in toto without change and interpretation, or the Church is on course to a total accommodation to postmodern culture.

Such presumed alternatives are neither Christian nor helpful. What is needed, instead, is an in-depth conversation on the approaches and encouragement that the Christian tradition provides for meeting the diverse challenges of today.

The study day held last week at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome – to which the presidents of the French, Swiss and German episcopal conferences had invited some 50 bishops, theologians, biblical scholars, Curia officials and media people – tried to achieve precisely that deep discussion. The idea was to transcend the suspicions and to overcome the fears and taboos that have been poisoning the climate in the Church in recent times, and to help establish a platform for informed exchange and respectful debate.

It took place in direct response to the Synod on the Family that began in Rome last year and continues its second phase in October with a focus on the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and contemporary world. It is an event that requires conversations of the kind that were attempted at the Gregorian.

The participants in the study day agreed to observe a kind of Chatham House rule – that is to speak freely about our meeting without attributing statements to specific participants. What follows is my personal recollection and reflection.

We began the day with a celebration of the Eucharist. The three working sessions that followed each opened with a short paper by a male and female scholar, one in French and one in German. The first session was devoted to reflections on biblical hermeneutics, the second to reflections on a theology of love, and the third to reflections on a theology of biography. During the sessions and the in-between

conversations we recognised the need to explore the horizon in which we actually wished to consider any particular theological, moral or ecclesial issue.

The Bible and the texts of the tradition are read in the different contexts of our world. God communicates in and through language and so there cannot be a language-free approach to God's self-communication in history. Divine revelation has chosen human language to proclaim the good news of God's creative and redemptive project. Therefore we must reflect on our common hermeneutical predicament.

Hermeneutics is the art of understanding. It comprises a genuine love of God and of God's incarnate Word in history and a continuing search for the meaning and significance of our faith in our respective historical, cultural and communicative circumstances. Interpretation never stops.

Moreover, we Christians need each other when reflecting on the tradition and practice of our faith. In this sense, what is required from the bishops at the forthcoming synod is a critical exploration of faith and of the present challenges. In their mid-term report the synod fathers spoke of mercy, of the law of graduality, caused by God leading his people step by step, and the call to recognise the suffering of those affected by family and marital breakdown. The report also speaks of "courageous pastoral choices" and "new pastoral choices".

Certainly, no participant in the synod should attempt to hide behind claims to doctrinal unchangeability. Rather, as expressed in the Second Vatican Council document *Dei Verbum* the synod fathers can enjoy the possibility of growth in faith and understanding with the help of the Holy Spirit. In this respect, the council mentions explicitly the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts, their sense of the spiritual realities that they experience, and the proclamation of the Magisterium. Christian laity and clergy are involved in this process together – and together need to overcome clericalism.

Once faith in the good news of God's emerging reign and an awareness of our hermeneutical predicament are accepted as our point of departure, specific moral issues and challenges can be considered with a clearer sense of direction. God's reign is a reign of love. This has nothing to do with sentimentalism or romanticism, but with our efforts to relate to the otherness of our fellow human beings and of ourselves, and to the radical otherness of God. Otherness can never be exhausted in our acts of love. Instead in loving the other, God and my own self, I am drawn ever more deeply into the recognition of otherness.

Wrestling with otherness is the business of love. Sociology, anthropology, psychology, biology and other disciplines can further deepen our understanding of human love and of sexual expressions in love. Sexuality is a gift of God to be accepted in faithful love. Since God has created human beings with different sexual orientations, it is imperative to identify an adequate order for these different forms of love and sexual expression.

Sacramental marriage has developed as the order for the love of heterosexual couples in the Church. However, it should not be forgotten that this sacramental process presupposes the support and encouragement of married couples by their local communities. Marriage breakdown is a fiasco for the whole community and not just the sad ordeal of the separating couple.

Why do we attend to the persons emerging from such a fiasco first when they are about to enter into a new and hopefully healthier relationship before God and in the Church by now excluding them as sinners from the Eucharist? Ought we not to deal with the breakdown of a married relationship when it occurs? What are our resources for supporting married couples before their marriage breaks down and, when this is unavoidable, to accompany them on a process of healing?

The other major challenge facing the Church is its attitude to same-sex relationships. Its failure to accompany faithful same-sex couples and identify a proper framework for their life before God is haunting the Church and diminishes its credibility as an institution charged with proclaiming God's love and with promoting human love. Out of context references to selected biblical phrases for the purpose of condemning same-sex love can never deflect from God's invitation to all men and women to form loving relationships.

Participating in this study day was a liberating experience. It is not that we identified all the issues to be faced, all the riches of the tradition to be explored, and all the contributions from other Churches to be considered. We talked more about couples than about family life and its problems and diverse forms today. Yet in the light of the Gospel we have looked at some of the challenges of discipleship in an honest and constructive way. We have embarked on a path of public, critical reflection and prayer. That surely is a promising start and an encouragement for the Church and the forthcoming synod.

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