

Jesus Never Imposes: ‘Amoris Laetitia’, discernment, and Christian maturity

“It is important to observe,” writes the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, “that Amoris Laetitia (AL) reminds us above all of God’s mercy and compassion, rather than solely moral regulations and canonical rules.”[\[1\]](#)

This is a theme that Pope Francis has been repeating since the beginning of his pontificate. In his speech opening the Pastoral Congress of the diocese of Rome,[\[2\]](#) he affirmed “the sensitivity with which God looks at our families helps us to direct our consciences in the same way as his.” He said that “the emphasis placed on mercy puts reality before us in a realistic way, not, however, with just any realism, but with the realism of God,” and that it is necessary to reject the “enclosures” that “shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune, and instead enter into the reality of other people’s lives and know the power of tenderness.” He concluded: “this impels us to develop a family ministry designed



to welcome, accompany, discern and integrate.”

These are the verbs that the pope has resorted to in answering the question: “How do we prevent a double morality from arising in our communities, one demanding and one permissive, one rigorist and one lax?” After stressing that “neither are the truth,” he said that “the Gospel chooses another way. For this, use those four words – welcome, accompany, integrate, discern – without nosing into people’s moral lives.”

Discern and integrate, taking into account mitigating factors and situations! Not least because, as we read in Amoris Laetitia: “The Church possesses a solid body of reflection about mitigating factors and situations” (AL 301). Discerning and integrating are not about exercising control, but about helping us understand the reality we live in starting from experience “so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable, and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

These are the themes that we can consider as guidelines[\[3\]](#) together with a quote that deals with the baptized who are divorced and civilly remarried: “The logic of integration is the key to pastoral care...” (AL 299).

Considering Concrete Reality

Of fundamental importance is the opening of the second chapter of Amoris Laetitia on “The Experiences and Challenges of Families.” Quoting St. John Paul II’s Familiaris Consortio (FC), no. 4, the pope writes: “We do well to focus on concrete realities, since ‘the call and the demands of the

Spirit resound in the events of history,’ and through these ‘the Church can also be guided to a more profound understanding of the inexhaustible mystery of marriage and the family’” (AL 31).

This teaching was already presented by *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), nos. 4 and 11. The first text says: “The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and interpreting them in light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions that people ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of one to the other. We must therefore understand the world in which we live, its explanations and its longings” (GS 4).

No less enlightening is the second text, “The people of God believes that it is led by the Lord’s Spirit, who fills the Earth. Motivated by this faith it labors to decipher authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires ... For faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God’s design for the human person’s total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions that are fully human” (GS 11).

These affirmations are the necessary foundation for considering people, times, places and other circumstances, precisely because the Spirit is present and working in historical events.

Therefore it is necessary to pay attention to reality – the same reality that engages us in one way or another – to identify through discernment the requests and movements of the Spirit.

This is what Pope Bergoglio underlines by citing the *Relatio Finalis* of the synod (2015), no. 51, (contemporaneously quoting FC 84): “When faced with difficult situations and wounded families, it is always necessary to recall this general principle: ‘Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations’” (AL 79).

Again, following the *Relatio Finalis* he goes on to stress: “The degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases and factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision. Therefore, while clearly expressing doctrine, pastors are to avoid judgments which do not take into account the complexity of various situations and they are to be attentive, by necessity, to how people live and endure distress because of their condition.”[\[4\]](#)

It should be taken into account that the pope lists an “immense variety of concrete situations” (AL 296-300). As a consequence, neither the synod nor the exhortation can offer a “new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases. What is possible is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake 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).[\[5\]](#) Furthermore, “the Synod Fathers stated that the discernment of pastors must always take place ‘by adequately distinguishing,’ with an approach that ‘carefully discerns situations.’ We know that no ‘easy recipes’ exist”[\[6\]](#) (AL 298).

The invitation to pay attention to concrete realities is continually present throughout the exhortation. The term “situation” is repeated no less than 90 times, “circumstances” 15 times, and “conditions” or “to influence” nine times.[\[7\]](#)

Concerning these concrete situations, it is important to remember that sometimes “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 pope realizes that “we also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations” (AL 37). He concludes: “We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them” (AL 37).^[8] We need to focus on “a positive and welcoming pastoral approach capable of helping couples to grow in appreciation of the demands of the Gospel” (AL 38) in imitation 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).

It should be always kept in mind that “priests have the duty to accompany these people on the way of discernment according to the teaching of the Church and the guidelines of the bishop” (AL 300).

Discernment and the will of God

What has been said implies careful evaluation of the concrete reality. This means both objective and subjective elements can contribute to reconciling us with the divine will

But how is an action done “in the Lord” to be identified from these elements? This is the question that requires “discernment.”^[9]

Saint Paul exhorts the Ephesians to act “as sons of light” and teaches that the “fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.” He invites them to “try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord” and to “be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise ones.” He concludes: “So do not be foolish but understand the will of the Lord.”^[10]

Helping others to act not as “fools” but as careful researchers of the divine will is one of the tasks of the presbyterate. This is what we read in the Second Vatican Council’s decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (PO): “As educators in the faith, priests must see to it either by themselves or through others^[11] that the faithful are led individually in the Holy Spirit to a development of their own vocation according to the Gospel, to a sincere and practical charity, and to that freedom with which Christ has made us free” (PO 6.2). And it adds incisively: “Ceremonies, however beautiful, or associations however flourishing, will be of little value if they are not directed toward the education of people to Christian maturity” (PO 6.2).

But what constitutes this “maturity”? The unequivocal answer is that “in furthering this, priests should help people become able to see what is naturally required and what is God’s will in the important and unimportant events of life (*quid res exigant, quae sit Dei voluntas*)” (PO 6.2). This “*quid res exigant*” (*res* being the concrete reality) is echoed in AL 31 and in the situations, circumstances and influences. The parallels between “*quid res exigant*” and “*quae sit Dei voluntas*” should also be.

Now, let us see how we can proceed following the path of Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

A method for this reading

Let us start by pointing out that for Ignatius discernment is a gift of the Spirit. We read in the Constitutions (C)[12] of the Society of Jesus that before making a decision those in authority should take into account “people, places, and times with the discretion given by the eternal light” (C 746). We also read that “charity and the discretion of the Holy Spirit will show the procedure to be followed” (C 219). “Charity and discretion” are two virtues that need to coexist. This is the meaning of the formula *discreta caritas* (charitable discernment) (cf. C 209; 237; 269; 582, etc)[13]: “A charity full of discernment and discretion, a discernment and a choice inspired by love, a love that makes discernment work and descends from the Spirit of Love.”[14] The prayer of Paul comes to mind: “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best” (Philippians 1:9-10).

To grow in knowledge and reach full discernment, it is worth insisting on the necessity to “proceed with great attention and thoroughness in our Lord” (C 204), taking into account “the variety of circumstances and the diversity of subjects” (C 367; cf. 64) and more concretely the “age, intelligence, inclinations, and the bases which one in particular had, or the common good that one hoped for”(C 354; cf. 92), talents (C 522) and also the “physical constitution” (C 298; 301), the “capacity of each to endure as discretion suggests” (C 285), the “disposition of persons” toward accepting or not a correction or a penance together with “the edification of all people and each person particularly, for the glory of God” (C 269), and finally, “greater service to God for the universal good” (C 618, 623, 626). [15]

It is therefore important to keep in mind the “real” person (talents and charism, intellectual capacity and will, habits and conditions, temperament and character, etc.) and also the ambience (traditions, customs, mentality, and needs of the locals, etc.) and the influence, positive or negative that a decision can have on people, family, groups and others in general, without forgetting how adapting to individuals should be the principal constitutive element of discretion and a quality that should be present in a formator in faith. We should keep in mind the words Jesus said to his disciple concerning his revelation: “...you cannot bear the weight now” (John 16:12) and the basic principles of the Spiritual Exercises: “these have to be adapted to the dispositions of the persons who wish to receive them, that is, to their age, education or ability, in order not to give to those who are uneducated or of little intelligence things they cannot easily bear and profit by.” (SE 18.1-2)

Whoever does not do this becomes, ipso facto, undiscerning.

We take it for granted that before looking for the divine will we must cultivate inner freedom by “stripping ourselves of affection”; prefiguring “the greater glory of God, the common good, and this particularly to the extent possible” (C 222); asking for the light of the Lord and resorting to the advice of others. Leaders, in fact, “however many difficulties and doubts they have, the more will recommend the matter to God our Lord, and the more will deal with others who can help them discover the will of God” (C 211); or rather, “because God our Lord in this case indicates his most holy will” (C 220).

Finally, they will weigh up “the reasons for one choice and the other” (C 222) and will adopt subsequent decisions. More incisively it is said that the one who is called to govern should “weigh all things and provide everything that will feel more pleasing to the divine and the fullness of goodness, for its greater service and glory” (C 437).

The expression “everything that will seem to be more pleasing to the divine and fullness of goodness” is the equivalent of the frequent “in Domino” that we find in the Constitutions. It refers to the subject who, attentive and docile to the Spirit, remembers, examines and evaluates, reflects and prays, decides and acts. From this in-depth examination a judgement of discretion should emerge: all things considered, in conscience – that is in awareness and conviction – I feel before God (in Domino) that I have to adopt this (and not another) decision for the greater glory of the Most Holy Trinity and the integral good of each and every person involved.

However, we do not need to imagine having a magic wand. “With all the competing values that bombard us today,” wrote the General Superior of the Jesuits Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, “making a free human choice is never easy. We very rarely find that all of the reasons for a decision are on one side. There are always pros and cons. This is where discernment becomes crucial. Discernment requires getting the facts and then reflecting, sorting out the motives that impel us, weighing values and priorities, considering how decisions will impact on the poor, deciding, and living with our decisions.”
[\[16\]](#)

“Solid food is for adults”

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, the terms “discernment” and “discern” appear a total of about 40 times. Specifically, the following are called to discern[\[17\]](#): pastors – that is, the bishops and priests – the local church, spouses, and the faithful. They should obviously have the necessary preparation and appropriate experience, as suggested by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews (5:12-14).

For the pastors, it should be noted that the confessor is not “an applicator of the norm,” but “a pastor and a father personally involved in the good of the penitent and in his Christian journey.” And that “today the attitude indicated by *Amoris Laetitia* demands that the confessor assume greater personal responsibility in evaluating the good of the penitent and the people involved, and to act with a merciful heart and with therapeutic intent. His role is certainly much more challenging. But you have to say that it also becomes more meaningful, richer, and more fully ministerial.”[\[18\]](#)

For the faithful and the spouses, consider that St. John Paul II had already written that the Church “does not accomplish this discernment only through its pastors ... but also through the laity,” and that, “Christian spouses and parents can and should offer their unique and irreplaceable contribution to the elaboration of an authentic evangelical discernment in the various situations and cultures in which men and women live their marriage and their family life.” (FC 5)

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote: “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the words of God. You need milk, not solid food” (Heb 5:12). Notice then that “anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness.” And he concludes with an affirmation that should urge all (the priests in particular) to proceed to a personal examination of conscience: “solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.” (Heb 5:13-14)

We remember with Josep Rovira Bellosó[\[19\]](#) that “prudent discernment appears to be an inalienable activity of a conscious and free person, capable of lucidly coping with all the elements that are part of a

specific, real situation.” This means surpassing the “stage of pure instincts” and having good motivations to understand that “discerning is a reflection that is an activity of one’s own human spirit,” that “everyone is called to be responsible in the face of problems affecting them and the world” and that “in proportion to this responsibility, each person must discern the most appropriate response to their own personal problems and their own universe, respecting truth, justice, and love.”

Also take into account the principle given by the Italian Bishops Conference in their Catechism for Adults: “Everyone’s personal responsibility is proportionate to their real ability to appreciate and to desire the good in a situation characterized by multiple psychological, cultural and social conditions. Attending to the fullness of Christian life does not mean doing what is abstractly more perfect, but what is concretely possible. It is not about lowering the mountain, but walking toward the summit at your own pace” (n. 919) but always in full respect for “the conscience of the persons” (AL 303). That is why it is necessary “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,” not least because discernment is “dynamic and must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions that can enable the ideal to be more fully realized” (AL 303).

Finally, it is worth recalling another of the pope’s teachings: “Jesus never imposes, Jesus is humble, Jesus invites. If you want to, come. The humility of Jesus is like this: he is always inviting but never imposing. All of this gives us food for thought. It tells us, for example, of the importance which the conscience had for Jesus too: listening in his heart to the Father’s voice and following it.” [\[20\]](#)

The pope then reiterated that “Jesus wants us free,” and asked: “And where is this freedom created?” The response: “It is created in dialogue with God in the person’s own conscience. If a Christian is unable to speak with God, if he cannot hear God in his own conscience, he is not free.” Hence the duty to “learn to listen better to our conscience,” especially because “conscience is the interior space in which we can listen to and hear the truth, the good, the voice of God. It is the inner place of our relationship with Him, who speaks to our heart and helps us to discern, to understand the path we ought to take, and once the decision is made, to move forward, to remain faithful.” [\[21\]](#)

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A thought from Blessed John Henry Newman [\[22\]](#) comes to mind: “Certainly, if I were obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, [...] I would drink to the pope, if you please; but to conscience first, and then to the pope afterward.”

No less interesting and appropriate is another passage from the same letter: “Conscience is a law of the mind; yet it is something more, it gives orders, indicates notion of responsibility and duty, fear and hope ... It is a messenger of him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and guides us. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.” [\[23\]](#)

Keep in mind also the words of Archbishop Bruno Forte, special secretary of the synod: “the Church did not have a synod to give or not give Communion to the divorced and remarried.” The Archbishop of Chieti-Vasto wrote, “thinking like that is reductive” and he stated that its purpose was to be able to grow in the capacity to be a mother church that accompanies and integrates, helping each person find his or her place in the will of God.” [\[24\]](#)

Finally, our attention is drawn to the pope's request for confessors "to be welcoming to all, witnesses of fatherly tenderness whatever the gravity of the sin, attentive in helping penitents to reflect on the wrong they have done, clear in presenting moral principles, willing to walk patiently beside the faithful on their penitential journey, far-sighted in discerning each individual case, and generous in dispensing God's forgiveness." [\[25\]](#)

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