Troubled Love? Theology and Pastoral Care Facing the Diversity and Fluidity of Contemporary Family Life: Reflections on an INTAMS Symposium

From 26-28 April 2018 INTAMS held an international symposium at the Catholic University Leuven under the title “Troubled Love: Theology and Pastoral Care for all Families”. In the aftermath of the 2014-2015 Bishops’ Synods and Pope Francis’s Postsynodal Exhortation Amoris laetitia, discussions inside the church often focused on the so-called “irregular family situations”, i.e. forms of family life that do not follow the pattern the church has been stipulating in her traditional teaching. In Amoris laetitia Pope Francis recommended a more open and welcoming attitude and called upon pastors to care in a particular way for “the faithful who are living together, or are only married civilly, or are divorced and remarried” (AL 78). The controversies which the papal advance caused in inner-church circles created the impression that the church was dealing here with a relatively restricted and in fact manageable problem, as if it were simply a question of finding an appropriate modus operandi in order to respond to some dissenting faithful who happen to deviate in their personal lifestyle from the church’s instructions. Situating the issue at this level, however, would mean ignoring the scale of the problem. What is at stake here is nothing less than the almost insurmountable discrepancy that has been growing between the church’s teaching on marriage and family on the one side and the lived reality of those – whether Catholic or not – who form families today on the other.

What Is at Stake?

Just take what the 1997 Catechism has to say about family: “A man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children, form a family. This institution is prior to any recognition by public authority, which has an obligation to recognize it. It should be considered the normal reference point by which the different forms of family relationship are to be evaluated.” (CCC 2202)

Today we have come to realize, however, that by far not every family originates in marriage. “Cohabitation”, “same-sex union”, “single-parent family”, and “blended...
family”, are some of the terms we have added to our vocabulary. Gone are the times in which “stepfamily” was the only term available to characterize a familial constellation that – although still closely calibrated to it – deviated from the default form.

We all still come from some kind of family, but the picture has become very colourful. After adolescence many young adults live together in what researchers call “prenuptial cohabitation”, heading in some unpredictable way for marriage at some later stage. When they eventually get married, some do so civilly only, others opt for a religious ceremony. Again, others cohabit without any intention to get married. Where the legal system offers the possibility, they enter into a registered partnership, whether the couple is heterosexual or of the same sex. For some of these couples, things turn out badly; then they separate or divorce.

If children have been involved in their previous union, one of the partners finds himself or, still more often, herself in a single-parent family. Many persons then start a new relationship and thus form a blended family. Some of them will get married for the first time while others will remarry; some will cohabit in the new family as they did already in their former union and others again will simply live together while having been married previously. The blended family then is a family in which, after a divorce or loss of a partner, two parents live together with one of them not being the biological parent of the children stemming from the other partner’s previous relationship. They may then produce children of their own of whom they both then become biological parents. Children from the former relationship may permanently and exclusively live in the new family, or they may alternatingly live in both households. And we have not even mentioned the many forms of parenting made possible by modern technologies of artificial reproduction.  

Whoever takes the trouble to further browse through the Catechism will find most of these situations referred to but almost always in an undifferentiated, dismissive, and condemning stance. That this is unacceptable for most of our contemporaries, including Catholic faithful, has been confirmed in the answers to the questionnaire in preparation for the 2014 and 2015 bishops’ synods.

A large portion of the respondents have clearly expressed their wish to receive orientation and support in the relational life choices they are confronted with, especially in a time in which the dominating (commercial and other) providers

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2 Two keynote papers at the symposium described the present-day reality of families in western, late-modern societies: Elisabetta Ruspini offered a sociological analysis of the diversity and fluidity of families which are there to stay, and from a counselling perspective Jean Marsh reported how families are challenged to cope with today’s political, economic, social, environmental, and religious instability.

of advice in the digital world are perceived as hardly reliable. But along with this cry for moral direction comes the not so tacit admission that in fact one does not expect much from the church in this regard. What is at stake here is indeed the question of whether or not the church will for good lose its authority and credibility – in a field to which, nota bene, it has paid considerable attention for many decades now.

What Has Happened?

The causes for the present dilemma have abundantly been investigated by historians, sociologists, and theologians. They lie in broader socio-economic and socio-cultural transformations as much as in the responses the church has given to these developments. Among the external factors which have affected the church just like any other societal player in late-modern society is a realignment of gender relations which seems unparalleled in human history. For the first time, female biographies have become disconnected from male biographies. Men have lost the monopoly, which they have held since time immemorial, of defining the gender relation. While the process is about to begin in other parts of the world, it has reached its peak in western societies where it has resulted in the disintegration of century-old family structures. Family is now no longer a fixed order to which you accede but something that has to be invented and shaped according to one’s individual needs and desires, whether male or female.

In the wake of this shift which has been enhanced by changes in the economic realm, a similar transformation has occurred in the mindset of modern societies in the course of which a natural law-based, essentialist conception of the relation between the sexes has lost its plausibility. As the same-sex marriage referendum in a dominantly Catholic country like Ireland has recently demonstrated, this ideological shift has now reached beyond its earlier confinement to an intellectual elite and spread to broader sections of society.

Seen from a larger perspective, interacting processes of detraditionalization, individualization, and pluralization have restricted the influence of formerly unquestioned authorities such as religion and church on our way of life. Whereas in the past religious norms used to determine individual biographies right up to the most private and intimate decisions, today individual needs and longings decide whether or not, and to what degree, religious norms and rituals are appropriated. As R. Bucher has rightly remarked, after having ceded its power of interpretation over the cosmos to the natural sciences in the 17th and 18th century and then over the community to 19th century social theories, it seems that the church has now also lost its influence on the third “c” – the corpus, the human body.4

The church, however, has not only become the victim of societal developments which it had to undergo passively. Her response to societal trends and transformations has often not been adequate either: be it that she ignored or underestimated such shifts and continued to address herself to a social reality that had long passed away; be it that she fell prey to the belief that the megalomaniac idea of a “perfect society” could compensate for her loss of real influence. During the INTAMS symposium, several inner-ecclesial flaws were diagnosed which obstruct the church’s ability to face the present-day reality of family life.

First, the Second Vatican Council’s attempt to reconceive of marriage and the family through personalist categories got bogged down in the post-conciliar church. Instead of putting marriage at the service of the human person with her fundamental needs and longings for fulfilment, enduring and fruitful intimate relationships, the magisterial discourse has over the past years retrieved a pre-conceived, fixed, and ahistorical model of marriage and made it a condition for human flourishing. Under the guise of “God’s plan for marriage and the family”, a natural-law based approach has re-emerged that conceives of marriage as a cosmic institution with ontological qualities that transcend the particularities of any human culture and society. Ignoring that it is precisely this supposedly timeless concept that is most at risk of being bound to a specific epoch and culture, this discourse cannot but conceive of diversifying forms of intimate relationships as deviant from and deficient with regard to the default form.5

Closely connected to this is a second aspect which has to do with a pre-conciliar conception of the relationship between doctrine and pastoral care or, more broadly, Christian practice. According to this vision, pastoral practice is the field of application of doctrinal truths – at best, its merciful application.6 Vatican II, however, has taught us that pastoral practice is a locus theologicus, a place of discovery of the church’s belief. This is especially true for marriage which, as pointed out in the previous point, is a cultural and historical institution, subject to change and transformation. Whatever the “doctrinal essence” of marriage may be, it cannot be determined apart from the way it is lived out by concrete persons in their specific and changing contexts. Pastors who are close to them and listen to their experiences are like seismographs who register what

5 In “La cohérence du septénaire sacramentel au service de la mission des couples les plus fragiles” (“The Coherence of the Seven Sacraments in Service of the Mission of the Most Fragile Couples”) Catherine Fino shows how the shift from an ontological to a personalist concept of the marital bond fits well into an overall understanding of the seven sacraments as accompanying a path of sanctification throughout one’s life.

6 In his paper “Neue’ familiale Lebensformen: Theologisch-ethische Perspektiven und normative Orientierungen” (“‘New’ Family Forms: Theological Ethical Perspectives and Normative Orientations”), Jochen Sautermeister shows how the pastoral approach of “applied doctrine” (he uses the German term “Anwendungspastoral”) has resulted in a perspective that has focused on moral deficit and failed to adopt a realistic and appreciative stance.
is going on in the field of intimate relationships. They should not be told to stand firm against slow shifts or more eruptive upheavals. They should be valued for what they have to contribute to making the church’s teaching relevant for its faithful and beyond.⁷

Apart from these flaws in the theological argument, there is, however, a more serious shortcoming which discredits the church in the eyes of many contemporaries. It appears that its teaching on marriage and family fails to proclaim God’s grace in the face of intimate human relationships which are always precarious, vulnerable, and in need of support and forgiveness. Different from God’s pledge to unfaltering love and faithfulness which is symbolized and confirmed in the marital sacrament, human commitment is always contingent and imperfect. Jesus, though, did not come to abolish human imperfection and weakness but to bring grace and mercy to it.⁸ So why then limit such grace and mercy only to those who dare to commit to each other as husband and wife in formal marriage and manage to stay together over a lifetime? What about those who still shrink back from a lifelong commitment, or commit unreservedly but to a partner of the same sex, or find a new love with whom they live much more happily than with the one they got married to in a former life?⁹ The summit of inconsistency seems in fact to be reached when from the church’s perspective the first, but broken marriage is still regarded as sacramental whereas a subsequent second union is penalized as gravely sinful, although it often opens up new life perspectives after the traumatic experience of divorce.¹⁰

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⁷ This is all the more true if, as Martina Kreidler-Kos (“Spirituelle Ressourcen in nicht-normativen Familien: Eine pastoral-theologische Perspektive” – “Spiritual Resources in Non-normative Families: A Pastoral-Theological Perspective”) convincingly demonstrates, non-traditional families draw upon and provide themselves spiritual resources which the church cannot permit herself to ignore.

⁸ According to Sylvie Barth in “Le chemin du couple électif: Une chance de résilience qui appelle à la conversion” (“The Path of the Elective Couple: A Resilience That Calls for Conversion”), contemporary couples have some natural affinity with the Gospel message. She shows how the strength of the common project of today’s couples, which she describes as le couple électif (“elective couple”), lies precisely in the awareness of and sensitivity to its vulnerability.

⁹ Susannah Cornwall in her contribution “Theology and Marriage: An Un/familiar Approach” in this issue addresses this question by asking whether also permanent covenanted polyamorous relationships between more than two partners could ever be understood to mediate grace in the way that marriage does. Even if one finds that this is stretching the concept of marriage too far, one has to recognize how methodologically pertinent her inquiry is for any theological exploration into marriage (see also below). In a similar way, D. Dawson Vasquez in his paper “Gregory of Nyssa and the Regularity of Marriage” questions any theological fixation on a specific cultural type of marriage and argues, referring to the Greek church father, that as a grace-giving form of living, marriage transcends the regular/irregular binary suggested by the magisterial discourse.

How to Turn the Tide?

There are good reasons to believe that Pope Francis in *Amoris laetitia* has made a similar analysis of the inner-ecclesial situation and has started, however cautiously, to suggest some concrete remedies. Especially when it comes to the perception of a church that is unmerciful, many find consolation and hope when they hear Francis proclaim: “…the Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence, like the beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among the people to enlighten those who have lost their way or who are in the midst of a storm” (AL 291). This quote from *Amoris laetitia* had provided the title for the INTAMS conference – a provocative and contested title, as became quickly clear during the discussions. Does the pope’s call to inclusiveness and integration not deserve full support as it allows the church to finally embrace and care for all those forms of contemporary family life that it had condemned as irregular, deficient, and sinful in its former teaching? Not if he does so in the same condescending way that we are used to from the church’s moral discourse! Who would not feel offended when addressed as belonging to the “weakest children” who have “lost their way” and whose loving relationships are qualified as “wounded and troubled”? While such objections were intuitively shared by many participants, they resonated most loudly during a panel session to which the organizers had invited personal accounts of a divorced father, a newly constituted family, a longstanding gay relationship, a lesbian relationship with children, and a deliberately chosen single motherhood. For the gay couple the phrase “signs of a wounded and troubled love” recalled the tone of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith from the 1970s which the Catechism had later summed up by classifying the homosexual inclination a “trial” for most of the persons having it (CCC 2358).

Such interventions reveal the entire spectrum of positions that can be found in the church – and in the broader society alike –, when it comes to assessing the current situation of family life: while there are those, underrepresented during the Leuven meeting, who castigate the collapse of the traditional family and fight for its restoration, for others the embrace of non-traditional family life still does not go far enough, and still others find themselves somewhere in between. More importantly, however, the discussion shows how thorny the path will be within the church, even if an agreement should be reached that contemporary family life should be welcomed and supported rather than frowned upon. A foretaste of such a scenario was given during an evening conversation with Johan Bonny, the Bishop of Antwerp, who had already asked for a revision of the church’s

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approach in the run-up to the 2014 Bishops’ Synod.12 Witnessing to his personal experience, the bishop reported how personal encounters with partners and parents in various kinds of non-traditional relationships had contributed to transforming his theological thinking and pastoral practice. Participants who wished to were allowed for a moment to dream of a church in which bishops unreservedly embrace the personal choices of people with regard to their intimate relationships, whether in cohabitation, second marriage, same-sex union, or newly constituted families. This was for many a powerful, both liberating and invigorating, experience although it could not detract from the fact that the way from dream to reality is still a slow and difficult one. Among the signposts that were finally set for this journey, the following deserve to be summarized here.

1. Before any theological and ethical argument about marriage and family can and should be developed, first and foremost a sincere listening to the individual life stories and relational choices of persons is imperative whatever they may be and however unconventional or even irresponsible they may appear at first sight. Pope Francis has correctly reminded the church to train itself in the “‘art of accompaniment’ which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5)” (Evangelii gaudium, 169). As the reference to “troubled love” in Amoris laetitia shows, our theological and pastoral discourse is at risk of discriminating against and offending persons, sometimes unknowingly and unintentionally. But we can only come to know this if we are ready to suspend concepts and principles and give room to individual biographies.

2. The duty to listen to individual persons and their life stories, however, does not dispense the Christian community from developing sound theological and ethical arguments that are suitable to account for the present-day diversity and fluidity of family life. Pope Francis’s reference to “troubled love” in Amoris laetitia could provide a useful paradigm – on the condition that it is not used to qualify living arrangements that were traditionally regarded as “irregular” but understood more broadly as a characteristic of all human loving relationships. Amoris laetitia unambiguously dismisses any criteria that would lend themselves to judging particular types or forms of family according to some theological, moral, or spiritual ranking. Sacramental marriage is always “an imperfect sign of the love between Christ and the Church” (AL 72), and any family is supposed to make a “historical journey” which does not allow us to demand “of our interpersonal relationships a perfection, a purity of intentions and a consistency which we will only encounter in the Kingdom to come” (AL 325). In this way, all loving relationships are fragile and “troubled”, and that is what “keeps us from judging harshly those who live in situations of frailty” (AL 325). Francis’s compelling refusal of any idealization13 puts all marriages and families on an equal footing

13 See also AL 36: “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
and thus frees partners and parents from the pressure – propagated by today’s secular mentality as much as by traditional church teaching – of striving for perfect relationships. The idea of the “good enough” relationship, which resonates more and more in the counselling sector, will not only bring necessary relief to present-day lovers and parents alike. It also allows us to turn sincerely and without moral judgement to those whose relations are really “wounded”. They do exist, whether in traditional or not-so-traditional families, and what they need in the first place is understanding, empathy, and support, not condemnation or any condescending form of mercy.

3. If the church and its ministers wish to sincerely welcome, support, and guide the growing number of non-traditional couples and families, they have to explore the ways “in which Christian theological conceptions of institutions such as marriage, family, parenting and reproduction have changed and are changing, and … what resources exist within and beyond the tradition to understand these changes not as a raging tide to be turned back, but as in continuity with goods deeply embedded in the collection of theologies concerned with the Christian faith.”14 The crucial question then is, as the author of the previous quotation repeated at the symposium, “how far such changes may go before they represent a rupture from the tradition and become something discontinuous with it”.15 From the perspective of traditional church teaching, marriage understood as a formal, exclusive, lifelong, heterosexual, and reproductive union is the irrevocable foundation without which there is no legitimate family life. But in the eyes of many contemporaries, outside and increasingly also within the church, marriage has also turned out to be a property-bound, patriarchal, and heteronormative institution which does not or no longer reflects the covenantal style of relationship which the biblical tradition recalls. What if our concept of marriage needs to be stretched in order to include types of relationships that would clearly fall under the biblical notion of covenantal love? However complex such inquiries may be and however inconvenient and unsettling they may appear at first sight, they are indispensable as a “significant catalyst for marriage’s own ongoing self-reflexivity and reform”.

4. One may wonder, however, whether this inquiry into the viability of theological concepts is sufficient in itself to carve out a path for the Christian community in the midst of diverse and fluid forms of living together. If there is something like a “sense of the faith and of the faithful” which the church may rely on in these matters as well, it can hardly be pinned down to some conceptual definition of what marriage and family are or ought to be. The core meaning of covenantal relationships reveals itself, rather, by way of experience and intuition.

of real families. This excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God’s grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite.”

The biblical tradition contains such intuitive insights. Take for instance this one: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” (Is 49,15) People inside and outside the church intuitively understand that this is what close relationships and family life are all about, however difficult this may be to realize for humans. To put it in theological terms: this is the way of God’s unconditional and never-failing loving which humans also aspire to but most of the time fall short of. Theological rationalization (and ensuing pastoral practice) always succumbs to the temptation to enshrine such intuition in conceptual frameworks that are meant to conserve it. However, the deep sense of covenantal relationship cannot be enclosed in any well-defined concept or type of family but has to be practiced and tested in concrete situations. That is why a lot of theological wisdom and Christian faith can be found in the reaction of parents who, blindsided and devastated by the coming-out of their homosexual son, decide to stand by him rather than side with the church’s teaching on homosexuality.\textsuperscript{16} Covenantal love sometimes has to break the vessel we try to keep it in. The church’s credibility and her authority to recall God’s love for humanity will depend on her ability to be welcoming of the diversity of family forms not in spite of, but because of her teaching on marriage and family. Pope Francis at least believes “that 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’” (AL 308).

\textsuperscript{16} See also the examples in M. Kreidler-Kos: “Spirituelle Ressourcen in nicht-normativen Familien: Eine pastoral-theologische Perspektive”.

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