

A Look Ahead: Children in Same-Sex Families – Perspectives for Theological Investigation

I.

Thanks to Pope Francis's Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, it is possible to discern a new pastoral and theological sensitivity on the part of the magisterium vis-à-vis the forms of family living. Although the ideal of the sacramental marriage between a man and a woman counts as the guiding theological-anthropological basis for the foundation of a family (*Gaudium et spes* 47–52), Pope Francis's gradualist pastoral-theological way of looking at things in *Amoris laetitia* has opened up the possibility that the magisterium may take a paradigmatically new perspective.¹ This indicates a shift in the pastoral and theological reflection on forms of living in family and partnership, from a primary orientation to norms, in the direction of an orientation to values and virtues. This shift of perspective permits an approach that values, esteems, and supports even those forms of living that are borne up by love, commitment, and responsibility, but do not correspond to the ideal of marriage; for otherwise, the realizations of values in these relationships are regarded by the church and the magisterium merely as “deficient” and “irregular.”

In this way, an approach oriented to values and virtues makes it possible to see the specific challenges, concerns, and needs – as well as the mutual care, the hopes, the solidarity and love, and the religious-spiritual resources on which such couples draw – in the quality that these actually have with regard to the good of the partners, and (where appropriate) for the education of their children and for the task of proclaiming the gospel. On the basis of the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013), the central concern of Pope Francis in *Amoris laetitia* is to promote respect for the dignity of all human beings, the transmission of the Christian faith in the God who is love and mercy, and the personal encounter with Jesus Christ in the life of families. It is especially in chapter 8 that Pope Francis turns to the fragile and vulnerable aspects and forms of the family.

1 See J. SAUTERMEISTER: “‘Neue’ familiale Lebensformen: Theologisch-ethische Perspektiven und normative Orientierungen”, in: *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* 24 (2018), 248–263.

The INTAMS Symposium on the theme of “Troubled love”, which was held in Leuven on 26–28 April 2018, offered an opportunity to look and to hear in greater depth.² Paying heed to *Amoris laetitia* means becoming aware of, and taking seriously, the experience of persons who live in such structures, and who are baptized members of the church and thereby belong to the community of believers. It is therefore both logical and honest in theological, pastoral, and spiritual terms to study these experiences, ways of living, and existential realities – and all the more so, when children are also involved. The Christian ethos stipulates that children deserve a special theological, pastoral, and ethical sensitivity. There is a consensus in the social sciences on the descriptive level that a “family” exists where two generations live together and children are present. They deserve special care. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,³ which has been ratified in many countries, provides a legal codification of children’s welfare, and this is also (although that is sometimes forgotten) a decisive normative basis for the formation of Catholic marital and sexual moral theology in its present-day form, when this moral theology is given its proper place within the larger context of its genesis in natural law and goods-based ethics. The transmission of life and care for children through the best possible stable conditions for their education and their growing to adulthood: this was the anthropological-pedagogical subtext for the normative ideal of indissoluble sacramental marriage. In theological language, this reflects God’s creative action in human action.

Christian education, the learning of faith, and the transmission of faith to children mostly, and primarily, take place in the family, and this is why the family is also regarded as the decisively important locus and habitat of the handing on of faith and the proclamation of the gospel. From a theological perspective, therefore, the family can certainly be understood as a generative expression of the fruitfulness of a couple, which goes beyond the biological dimension of procreation. (This can also be seen in the fact that, in addition to the possibility of adoption, other symbolic or pedagogical forms of care or of “parenthood” are recommended to childless couples.) Children are seen here as themselves a gift, not as an object of someone else’s possessiveness or as the egocentric fulfillment of another person’s own needs. This protects them against being instrumentalized and manipulated by individuals, parents, or other adults with their own interests; and it emphasizes the dignity of the children themselves. It should be impossible for children to be subjected to the desires of others. Children deserve the goodwill and the unselfish and considerate love of their parents. Theologically speaking, there is an expression in children and families of the optimism of the creator God and of the Christian hope of success and being made perfect in the finitude of all human endeavors and efforts. The creative quality of a love

2 On this, see the special theme issue “Troubled Love: Theology and Pastoral Care for All Families”, *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* 24/2 (2018).

3 See www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx (accessed 04.03.2020).

between partners, a love that does not circle symbiotically around itself, seeks to bear fruit, to be open to life, to make the gift of itself, and to impart life.

II.

Against this background, it is the future task of theological investigation to look more intensively at forms of family living of various kinds, drawing on information from the human sciences, engaging in a mature theological-ethical reflection, and employing religious-spiritual sensitivity. If this is accepted in principle, one will not be able to dismiss without further ado homosexual couples' desire to have children. Nor will one be able to ignore families with homosexual parents or couples that have come into existence in various ways, whether with one biological parent, as adoptive parents, with a single parent, or with an adult partner.

From the perspective of the social sciences, we should not overlook the fact that the empirical data on families with same-sex couples is as yet very small and refers primarily to countries and cultures that have a Western-modern character, and that tend to display both legally and societally an acceptance of homosexual couples and of what are sometimes called "rainbow families". Here too, however, one can often observe a discrepancy between legal recognition, on the one hand, and social attitudes towards homosexual partnerships and to family systems with homosexual couples, on the other hand. Besides this, there are still many cultures and laws that discriminate against, stigmatize, or even criminalize persons with a homosexual gender orientation.

This means that theological reflection demands a special sensitivity, since it is always embedded in contexts of cultural understanding and of plausibility that form the cultural horizon of the normative justification of forms of family living, or of the criticism of such forms. Images of the family with a religious character, together with the ethical implications of such images, often play an important role here. In view of the importance of inculturation for the gospel of the family, it is essential to take these cultural factors into account. Unlike a universalistic approach, this involves the concrete conditions under which such forms of family living are in fact lived and in which they meet with recognition or discrimination. If, moreover, we bear in mind that today's primary understanding of human sexuality was formed only at the beginning of the eighteenth century, we will – at least from the perspectives of the social sciences and the sociology of knowledge – be cautious vis-à-vis premature essentialist and normative fixed definitions of lived sexuality and of how this is to be understood. This is because, from the perspective of the human sciences, sexuality is formed materially and discursively, in the concrete shape that it takes, via cultural techniques, practices that are given a symbolic meaning, forms of knowledge, and economic formations, in such a way that it is regarded in people's lives and in daily praxis as normal, as something taken for granted, precisely in this concrete shape. The corresponding

norms then describe the framework that imposes an order on, and imparts stability to, sexuality, partnership, marriage, and family. In terms of the sociology of norms, however, this leads ineluctably to the positing of boundary lines, and this can lead to exclusion and discrimination. And this factor makes it appear all the more important to emphasize the critical potential of theology, in order to do justice to the dignity of human beings, to identify effective signs of the gospel that is offered in people's lives and in their family contexts, and finally, to make it possible for everyone (and especially for those who need it most), and for children, to experience the gospel of the love of God.

III.

This issue of *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* on the theme of "Children in Same-Sex Households" takes up the impulses from the INTAMS Symposium in 2018, elaborating them in greater depth and focusing more precisely on their contents. One must take into account here the church's tradition, people's life experience and their Christian-spiritual self-interpretation, the relevant data of the human and social sciences, and social-ethical, pastoral-theological, and religious-pedagogical perspectives. Only in this way will it be possible to construct in a responsible and scholarly manner a theological assessment and consolidation that is in keeping with *Amoris laetitia*.

Since the focus lies on children, there exist several points of orientation that provide theological, ethical, legal, and pastoral guidance for the continuing discussion. (1) With regard to *developmental psychology*, children require special care, affection, goodwill, protective love, accompaniment, and support so that they can grow and mature. Stable and reliable caregivers, who accompany and support (their) children with love, goodwill, and emotional responsiveness have a positive influence on the development of children's identity. (2) Since children are dependent on others, they are particularly responsive and at risk in their malleability. The child's trust can be strengthened, but it can also be weakened, thereby impairing in a lasting manner a child's place in the world, and thus their trust both in themselves and in the world. *Theologically* speaking, therefore, the human being's trust in God can be reflected in children in a special way. Accordingly, children deserve a special care. (3) Human beings cannot make themselves and call themselves into life. This is why they experience themselves in their existence as "given". Theologically speaking, children must be regarded as a *gift*; children are not a possession, and this is true universally, and independently of the particular forms of living in which children live and are desired. (4) As a gift, children must not be instrumentalized. Like all human beings, they possess a *dignity*. This is why they must not be made to serve the satisfaction of another person's wishes. They must not be turned into instruments for the realization of particular interests in terms of societal legitimation or emancipation. (5) If children are seen and supported in their dignity, the care of children can be regarded as the

expression of the *selfless* and *donative generativity* or *fruitfulness* of a couple, and this intention must be esteemed, without any qualifications. From a moral-theological point of view, however, we must ensure that the empirically validated and anthropologically plausible conditions for the development of a healthy identity exist. (6) Accordingly, the following principle is absolutely valid: children must not be discriminated against, stigmatized, put at a disadvantage, or exploited, irrespective of the form of living in which they grow up and live. Both they and the families in which they live deserve *recognition, respect, and attention*. (7) The criterion of theological reflection, the ecclesial use of language, and pastoral activity must thus be the extent to which they *de facto* serve the good of the children, the proclamation of the gospel, the transmission of faith, and the opening of the door to the personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

IV.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that persons with a homosexual gender orientation are to be treated with “respect, compassion, and sensitivity” (n. 2358; Latin: *observantia, compassione et suavitate*). It also emphasizes that “every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided” (CCC n. 2358; Latin: *quodlibet iniustae discriminationis signum*). It is only logical that these requirements apply *a fortiori* to children and their families. Esteem or respect means the recognition that these persons exist; one must encounter them as persons in their relationships, and not disparage them and despise them with societal prejudices or discriminations. A lack of concrete personal encounters and experiences can, however, mean that they are not truly met with respect, sensitivity, and empathy.

The Catholic understanding thus involves a respectful, empathetic, and tactful or sensitive dealing with other persons. This also means listening attentively and empathetically. And it means sharing in solidarity other persons’ needs and concerns, as well as their joys and hopes. All this is the expression of an esteem that is due to every human being *qua* human being and image of God. It must be possible to experience this in interpersonal and societal contexts, and above all in encountering and accompanying other persons, so that human beings appear, not primarily as members of one particular societal group, but as individuals with a biography and a family history of their own. Here, the individual is acknowledged and encountered as a person in their own right. Such experiences of fellowship, encounters, and friendship with children in rainbow families, or with homosexual couples and their families, opens up a sphere of perception, of experience, and of life in which something of the Spirit of Jesus can be sensed and experienced in the encounter between people.

This brings us to the pastoral and theological task of developing our thinking in accordance with the human and social sciences, anthropology, theology, spirituality, and pastoral care, in order to see how we are to encounter the complex

and highly differentiated realities of relationships and families such as (for example) rainbow families. *Psychology* and *sociology* must reflect first and foremost on the special family tasks and challenges, such as the questions of parenthood, biological origin, and social acceptance and care, the question of the development of identity, the question of societal, cultural, and religious reactions, patterns of interpretation and ideas about normality, or the question of the gender relationships between the parents. *Ethics* requires reflection, under global conditions and with cultural sensitivity, on the sociocultural situation of recognition, or on the conditions that lead to contempt or on a constellation of discrimination and threats to people's lives, as well as on the political and legal conditions with regard to protection. Here, one will have to pay attention to heterogeneities, ambiguities, and asynchronicities. But quite apart from these issues, it is necessary for theology and for the church to emphasize and to defend without restriction the dignity of the children and the parents, *a fortiori* where they are exposed to special threats. *Theology* must also reflect on the spiritual resources and the religious foundations, in order that the gospel of the love of God can be experienced by everyone, and the door is opened to the personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

If this is to succeed, the experiences, cares, and hopes of everyone must be voiced in as unprejudiced a manner as possible; naturally, this also includes those who take part in the discourse in the community of believers and in the shared confession of faith in Jesus Christ. This means that the following steps should be taken in further involvement with "rainbow families" and with children in homosexual relationships: (1) To perceive, to get to know, and to understand them better – in terms of the social and human sciences, of anthropology, and of the environment of people's lives (*empirical-anthropological*). (2) To uncover, to identify, and to act against discrimination, violence, injustice, the refusal of recognition, etc. (*moral* and *legal*). (3) To open up perspectives that are at the service of life and that open up life, forming and accompanying consciences (*theological-ethical*). (4) To develop a pastoral logic of inclusion (not of separation and exclusion) in the pastoral use of language and in theological thinking (*pastoral*). It will be the task of a theology that is committed to *Amoris laetitia* to continue thinking academically about this theme under ecclesial and cultural conditions that are both complex and heterogeneous.⁴

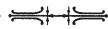
SUMMARY

A Look Ahead: Children in Same-Sex Families – Perspectives for Theological Investigation

Jochen Sautermeister here provides a conclusion to this special themed issue. He begins by noting that *Amoris laetitia* brings about a change in the approach to family life that encourages an appreciation of all relationships that are marked by commitment and responsibility. This leads to considering relationships from the perspective of their inner

4 English translation: Brian McNeil.

quality rather than their particular correspondence to traditional ideal forms. What is required, then, is to evaluate family life from the perspective of the care and support that its different forms provide for the children, in particular how family forms enable the passing on of the faith from one generation to the next. This includes both children produced biologically through a couple's sexual relationship and children brought into the family through other means, provided that in both cases the child is seen as a gift to be cared for rather than a right or possession. Theological reflection, he says, cannot proceed without entering into dialogue with the human sciences; it must reflect the realities of diverse family situations as they are lived. The author offers specific principles regarding children that should guide future theological reflection in both ethical and pastoral areas. This includes the principle that care for children requires treating their families with recognition, respect, and care, regardless of the form that that family takes. He concludes by reflecting on a way forward that begins with getting to know and understand same-sex families in their lived reality, with the help of the human sciences, defending the dignity of parents and children by denouncing any discrimination or injustice, reflecting on the relationships in the light of the gospel in order to form the consciences of those involved, and an integration of rainbow families into the pastoral care of the church.



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