

FOREWORD

This book, the result of patient research, is timely. Indeed, it responds to several demands that emerged during the Bishops' Synod of 2014 and 2015 dedicated to the family. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis draws courageously the consequences of this synodal process, desired by him. It calls Christian communities to an examination of conscience on their way of presenting marriage to the younger generations (AL 37), as well as on their readiness to join people in their experience of love today. The challenge is to accompany them in truth, starting from what they already live, while trying to lead them further with God's help. In the motu proprio *Summa familiae cura*, the Pope also asks that this pastoral impetus be based on multidisciplinary scientific work, "with reference to the development of the human sciences and anthropological culture".

The Way of Elective Love: this is how Sylvie Barth designates, at the end of a careful discernment, the ideal that animates many couples, whether or not there is marriage. By choosing each other, they also choose the duration and the gift of life. She sees it as an expression of spiritual quest in a post-modern context, so ignoring it would miss a spiritual challenge for our time. Her proposal is ultimately very simple, but it is deployed in a very methodical manner. First, the author takes great strides through the foundations and recompositions of the spiritual in the Western world. She then recaptures the historical stages in which the reference to conjugality in Christianity was constituted, and then the universe of conjugal spirituality. It emerges that Christianity has strongly contributed, even if never in a linear way, to promoting "the lasting affinity bond", "conjugal civilization" and the meaning of "conjugal intimacy". If the "*elective couple*" is today the new paradigm of conjugality, its roots are nevertheless very old, at the interface between culture and Christian faith. From then on, it becomes possible to think of the "*path of elective love*", both in the couple's relationship and in parenthood, as a spiritual experience that has its place in the Christian regime and can find its full development there.

Sylvie Barth does not content herself with stating the fact: she elaborates the concept of "co-elective spirituality" to test the paradigm of *elective love* and to verify its eligibility in the Christian faith. Her multidisciplinary perspective is here unfolding all its fruits. By combining the psychoanalytic approach, biblical reading and practical knowledge of couples' therapy, it shows how the Christian approach to difference and reciprocity, considered in the light of promise and covenant, makes it possible to re-grasp *elective love* in the mode of interaction, equity and duration. The pitfalls of mistrust and violence are not ignored. On the contrary, the path of "*co-elective spirituality*" strives to overcome them in response to the "quest for collaboration and communion" that animates humanity "created in gendered polarity".

This original approach integrates spiritual discernment at the heart of the theological discernment of the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel. She strives to revive the work of the Holy Spirit at work among contemporary couples, with their gifts and limitations. In passing, she questions the theme of man-woman complementarity, present in the most recent documents of the Magisterium. Above all, it makes a major contribution to the discernment of the *semina verbi* (AL 77) and to the accompaniment by the Church of "those who participate in her life in an imperfect way" (AL 78), keeping the focus on Christian hope. Sylvie Barth's criteria join other pastoral initiatives around the world. Let us think of the conclusions of the diocesan synod of San Diego which, in the autumn of 2016, decided to "promote an inclusive culture towards couples at all stages of their relationship", and hoped that "ambassadorial couples" would rise, who are "open to listening, open to interpersonal relationships, not judgmental, trustworthy and able to share the faith".

The relevance of Sylvie Barth's thesis is undoubtedly also due to its triple roots in the community life of the catholic movement *Fondacio, Christians for the world*, in the practice of counselling and training for couples, and in a personal experience of marriage where the *way of elective love* continues to generate surprising resources of generosity and hospitality. From this point of view, the present work reveals a woman's voice that will count in marriage and family theology.

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