

INTRODUCTION

Love is like wine. Just as wine needs time to mature, so too love needs time to grow. In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *The Joy of Love*, Pope Francis voices the belief that we can only grow in love during the different stages of our lives when we learn to use the words “Please?”, “Thank you” and “Sorry” generously and often. This is why he offers these three words as keys to living together in community, in the full knowledge that every loving relationship has both light and dark sides.

It is true that the pope brings this up as part of his discourse on marital love. It is not difficult to see, however, that these words have an equally major impact on the success of other kinds of love that are lasting and comprehensive. The love in families between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, between grandparents and grandchildren; the love practiced in religious communities and lay fraternities, in the Church and among the faithful; but also the love between unmarried cohabitants, between young (and not so young) lovers, between gay and lesbian partners. Further, Pope Francis repeats these words when he talks about the education and moral formation of children: “A person may be sociable and open to others, but if over a long period of time he has not been trained by his elders to say ‘Please?’, ‘Thank you’, and ‘Sorry’, his good interior disposition will not easily come to the fore” (AL 266).

WONDERFULLY COMPLICATED

A new wind is blowing through the Church. Pope Francis has opened the windows noticeably wider. This creates expectations. This raises hope. Which is wonderful. But there is still much work to be done. The pope faces the challenge of fulfilling the expectations raised by his talk about mercy. It is good to throw the windows open to let fresh air circulate in a somewhat stale room; it is also necessary to fasten those open windows in order to prevent them from slamming shut again. Put differently: changes need to be secured. Charisma should evolve from radiance to actions. If not, the wind threatens to turn into a meaningless breeze.

Pope Francis realizes this better than anyone. This is the reason his letter *Amoris Laetitia* or the *Joy of Love* (17 March 2016) – in which he has drawn from the double Synod on the Family in 2014 and 2015 on the calling and mission of the family in the contemporary Church and world – serves as an invitation to bishops, pastors and theologians, the faithful, and, even more broadly, to all parties who are interested, to join in this reflection on the future of family and marriage. The pope summoned the synods to offer heartfelt support to family and marriage, institutions which continue to be under severe pressure in our society. Prior to the synods, he undertook a consultation process on an unprecedented scale, seeking the views of the local churches on the topic. He called upon the bishops to consult all the faithful and interested parties, including you and me. For the first time in a long time, we were in a position to say what weighs heavily on our minds and hearts concerning marriage and family, and were really listened to.

As the shepherd of his flock, Bishop Johan Bonny of Antwerp (Belgium) and one of the authors of this book, took up the challenge himself. Prior to the double Synod on Marriage and the Family in 2014–2015, he recorded his questions and reflections in his letter *Synod on the Family, Expectations of a Diocesan Bishop*. In this letter, he takes the many expectations of the faithful in his diocese as the starting point of his reflection on the Christian vision of marriage and family in a Western, secular context.

The synod fathers consulted the many and diverse remarks, suggestions, questions and expectations from around the world during their deliberations, and they expressed their views openly. The impact of the pope's personal interventions in these deliberations should not be underestimated; neither should his unexpected but strategic announcement of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, by means of which he shaped the interpretative framework of this synod.

In this elegant way, the pope lifted the embargo on raising the issue of so-called “irregular” situations, which have been commonplace in Belgium, Western Europe, and the wider Western world for thirty years or more. Bishops, theologians and pastors in Belgium have let pastoral wisdom take precedence over canonical-juridical concerns for some time now. They no longer need to remain under the radar with their approach. All of a sudden, the ordinary faithful also have a voice in the ongoing debate in Rome. This debate has not concluded with the close of the synod, since, as the pope emphasizes in his Apostolic Letter, due to the complexity of the topics

addressed, and the considerations raised, it has become quite clear that we should continue to examine a number of doctrinal, moral, spiritual and pastoral matters in an open and frank manner.

By means of this book, we want to stimulate a continuation of the synodal process. There is certainly no intention here of crossing the t's and dotting the i's. Instead, we want to put out a warm, inviting call to all those active in pastoral work, catechesis, family ministry, youth ministry, in schools, in the upbringing of children, and more broadly, to the faithful and the interested public in our society, to engage in an exchange of views. The three of us spent many afternoons together, with the text of *Amoris Laetitia* within reach. We used the notes that Bishop Bonny had prepared for his participation in the second Synod on the Family in Rome in 2015, in which he took part as a representative of the Church in Belgium, and made good use of the notepad that he brought back from Rome, utterly filled with reflections and notes about statements made during the various interventions. We were much enriched by the extensive theological expertise – and infectious enthusiasm – of Emeritus Professor Roger Burggraeve, who has been developing an ethics of growth for young people since 1967. He advocates an ethics of the achievable, which respects the good that is present in the particular situation of young people, and with an eye for growth towards the Gospel ideal. For a long time such an ethics did not seem to stand a chance in the Church, but is now given wide space in *Evangelii Gaudium* and particularly in *Amoris Laetitia*. But even so, there is still much work to be done.

We met at monthly intervals to continue a conversation; frank and free-spirited, eager and surprised, carefully weighing things up. These were not discussions during which we tried to prove our case or outwit a competitor. They were exchanges of views that moved back-and-forth, with one speaker expressing ideas that got the other participants thinking, which prompted new thoughts with slightly different features, inviting new reflection and response, whereby all conversation partners contributed to the search for a meaningful way of thinking about relationships, marriage and family. In that ongoing process, we openly and honestly positioned ourselves in the tension between the radical, demanding Gospel ideal, on the one hand, and the attainable, the feasible, the best humanly possible, on the other. We did this without reducing the foundational significance of, or giving up the preference for, the married family (a family born of the marriage of the parents), both in today's society and in the faith community; but neither did

we give up on living and aspiring human beings. By doing so we want to respond to the request of our pope to initiate a real dialogue, meaning, not a detached academic discussion, but a pastoral exchange of views filled with merciful love, which constantly tries to understand, forgive, accompany, wait and – above all – integrate.

Due to the fact that the text of *The Joy of Love* reflects the divergent opinions voiced during the synods, it lends itself to such an exercise. In addition to its warm, merciful tone and pastoral approach, *Amoris Laetitia* also contains a number of statements and passages that some will find difficult to accept. They are like hard, unpredictable rocks on the road that the pope has taken in the form of quotations from various synod documents, to ensure that the synodal process is adequately reflected in the text. Sometimes these passages are difficult to reconcile with parts of the text written by Pope Francis himself, where he makes a personal plea for more pastoral discernment and a greater – and more outspoken – recognition of the good that is already present in so-called ‘irregular’ situations. It is up to us to stay vigilant, because going back to square one is something that we – as Church – no longer want nor should resort to.

Novel lines of reasoning will not be developed in this book. We walk well-trodden paths, proceeding from the concerns and fundamental teachings of the Church. We do not take away anything from what the Church puts forth as the truly desirable ideal. We take this as our framework to think together with all other people about the journey of life, departing from their daily concerns, made more difficult by smaller and bigger complications that they often did not choose to be burdened with. “What other choice do you have, as a shepherd”, Bishop Bonny asks himself, “but to set out on the road with all of your sheep, including those who do not follow the flock?”

This endeavor is absolutely consistent with the mercy that the pope advocates. Pope Francis repeatedly urges us to remove our sandals when we tread on the holy ground of the life of another (*Evangelii Gaudium* 169; cf. Ex 3, 5). This kind of attitude, acting with respect for God’s presence in the life of another, including when that other is very different from us, is absolutely essential if we truly want to get to know people and set out on the road with them. This shift in emphasis in the message of the Church should not be underestimated. This shift is concretely expressed in an understanding, respectful attitude towards people in lasting relationships that differ from sacramental marriage, even if the Church continues to advocate

heterosexual, procreative, and indissoluble marriage as the foundation of the family. This shift is occurring because the Church cannot – and does not want to – close its eyes any longer to the reality of a plurality of ways of life that, like sacramental marriage, pursue lasting love. While the institution of marriage is less popular nowadays, a large number of Christians and those who hold different views dream of a lasting, mutually loving relationship, and are working towards it. How can we support, guide and integrate them, even when they express their commitment in a form that differs from sacramental marriage?

Let it be clear that we do not wish to polarize and divide. Our starting point is not a discussion about the teachings of the Church, but an open dialogue with contemporary believers and the surrounding culture about relationship formation, marriage and family. How is this experienced nowadays? How do Christians mould and form their family and marriage? In which areas do they follow the teachings of the Church, and in which areas do they deviate from these teachings? How do we deal with this as a Church community? How can we – as Church – set out on the road with everyone? Together with our pope, we are seeking a balance between different principles of a healthy Christian ethics and theology, paying attention to the Scriptures, the tradition of the Catholic Church, and developing human experience.

The lens through which we are looking is that of the covenantal love of sacramental marriage as the foundation of the family. We do not let go of this Gospel ideal. It is precisely a defining characteristic of our Christian approach that not every relationship is comparable! Starting from this ideal, we develop a consistent relational ethics, bearing in mind various kinds of relationships in which partners express their commitment, not because of a compassionate or paternalistic attitude towards those living in them, but because we recognize the good that is also present in these relationships, and because there is also a path of growth there that leads to greater humanity and increased meaningfulness. Everyone needs to take into account what they can and cannot achieve because of who they are, their background, psychological development and so on, in order to work towards something valuable according to their abilities and limitations: the highest achievable aim in their situation.

We are well aware that in doing so, we commit ourselves to a difficult balancing act. We consciously and openly position ourselves in a tension that

is situated between two comfortable extremes: on the one hand, a rigorist approach that leaves no room for any consideration of specific, individual life situations, and, on the other, taking a relativistic path that goes along with every situation and preference that arises, and makes all distinctions disappear. We realize that this balancing act is not easy and entails a position that will not be appreciated by everyone. Following in the footsteps of Jesus, we opt for a warm-hearted Church that recognizes the goodness that the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human fragility. Is it not part of the Bible's teachings that we ought to judge without condemning? Jesus expects us "to stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune, and instead to enter into the reality of other people's lives and to know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated" (AL 308).

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