

IOANNES FRANCISCUS

Divina Miseratione et



Apostolicae Sedis Gratia

EPISCOPUS MARQUETTENSIS

Dear Priests, Deacons and Religious of the Diocese of Marquette,

Praised be Jesus Christ!

In this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, I wish to share with you the following reflections on pastoral accompaniment in light of *Amoris Laetitia*. Since its promulgation, several priests have asked me to provide additional guidance on the pastoral accompaniment of those in difficult and irregular marriage situations. Thus, I have chosen to write you and provide the following guidelines (cf. AL, 300), so that we together may seek and comfort the lost and those who feel that they are standing on the margins of the Church. I also encourage you to share this letter with lay persons in your parish who collaborate with you in the pastoral care of marriage. Let us review some pastoral wisdom, which I imagine permeates your ministry.

Spanning more than 200 pages, *Amoris Laetitia* reflects on the Synod on the Family's sweeping "examination of the situation of families in today's world" and provides direction for the pastoral care of the family. Although only a small portion of the document, much attention has been drawn to the topic of ministering to Catholics in irregular situations of marriage. In continuity with perennial Church teaching and discipline, Pope Francis calls on the ministers of the Church to meet these persons and accompany them, step-by-step, towards the fullness of truth. This journey begins with a unique, personal encounter with Jesus Christ. By helping people experience God's love, and with the strength of his grace, we can shepherd them to embrace and live the fullness of truth.

There has been much debate in the media and public discourse regarding whether Catholics in irregular situations, such as invalid marriages, may be admitted to Communion. This question is not the primary focus of *Amoris Laetitia*. Moreover, Church teaching and discipline have not changed. Rather, Pope Francis upholds the consistent teaching and discipline of the Church, while at the same time he calls us to pastoral solicitude to bring home the lost and lead them to embrace Jesus Christ and the fullness of his teaching. Pope Francis has said:

Naturally, if someone flaunts an objective sin as if it were part of the Christian ideal, or wants to impose something other than what the Church teaches, he or she can in no way presume to teach or preach to others; this is a case of something which separates from the community (cf. Mt 18:17). Such a person needs to listen once more to the Gospel message and its call to conversion. Yet even for that person there can be some way of taking part in the life of community, whether social service, prayer meetings or another way that his or her own initiative, together with the discernment of the parish priest may suggest. (AL, 297)

In order to avoid all misunderstanding, I would point out that in no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God's plan in all its grandeur... A lukewarm attitude, any kind of relativism, or an undue reticence in proposing that ideal, would be a lack of fidelity to the Gospel and also of love on the part of the Church for young people themselves. To show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being. (AL, 307)

Pope Francis proposes that instead of simply stating Church's teaching, we must through pastoral discernment find a way to invite a Catholic in an irregular situation to take part in the life of the community so that he or she may experience the love of God and a conversion of mind and heart. Herein we see the principal focus of *Amoris Laetitia*: the pastoral care of marriage in the context of evangelization and accompaniment.

In fact, Pope Francis does not explicitly address the question of Communion for the divorced and remarried without a declaration of nullity of the prior marriage. The only possible hint of this question resides in footnote 351 of *Amoris Laetitia*, which states: "In certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments." How should the footnote be interpreted? What are the "certain cases" in which a person in an irregular situation might receive the sacraments? In light of Pope Francis' assertion that the full ideal of marriage is to be proposed, let us examine the Church's consistent teaching in this regard.

Saint John Paul II addressed this question in *Familiaris Consortio*, his Apostolic Exhortation subsequent to the last synod on marriage:

Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations. There is in fact a difference between those who have sincerely tried to save their first marriage and have been unjustly abandoned, and those who through their own grave fault have destroyed a canonically valid marriage. Finally, there are those who have entered into a second union for the sake of the children's upbringing, and who are sometimes subjectively certain in conscience that their previous and irreparably destroyed marriage had never been valid.

Together with the Synod, I earnestly call upon pastors and the whole community of the faithful to help the divorced, and with solicitous care to make sure that they do not consider themselves as separated from the Church, for as baptized persons they can, and indeed must, share in her life. They should be encouraged to listen to the word of God, to attend the Sacrifice of the Mass, to persevere in prayer, to contribute to works

of charity and to community efforts in favor of justice, to bring up their children in the Christian faith, to cultivate the spirit and practice of penance and thus implore, day by day, God's grace. Let the Church pray for them, encourage them and show herself a merciful mother, and thus sustain them in faith and hope.

However, the Church reaffirms her practice, which is based upon Sacred Scripture, of not admitting to Eucharistic Communion divorced persons who have remarried. They are unable to be admitted thereto from the fact that their state and condition of life objectively contradict that union of love between Christ and the Church which is signified and effected by the Eucharist. Besides this, there is another special pastoral reason: if these people were admitted to the Eucharist, the faithful would be led into error and confusion regarding the Church's teaching about the indissolubility of marriage.

Reconciliation in the sacrament of Penance which would open the way to the Eucharist, can only be granted to those who, repenting of having broken the sign of the Covenant and of fidelity to Christ, are sincerely ready to undertake a way of life that is no longer in contradiction to the indissolubility of marriage. This means, in practice, that when, for serious reasons, such as for example the children's upbringing, a man and a woman cannot satisfy the obligation to separate, they "take on themselves the duty to live in complete continence, that is, by abstinence from the acts proper to married couples."

Similarly, the respect due to the sacrament of Matrimony, to the couples themselves and their families, and also to the community of the faithful, forbids any pastor, for whatever reason or pretext even of a pastoral nature, to perform ceremonies of any kind for divorced people who remarry. Such ceremonies would give the impression of the celebration of a new sacramentally valid marriage, and would thus lead people into error concerning the indissolubility of a validly contracted marriage.

By acting in this way, the Church professes her own fidelity to Christ and to His truth. At the same time she shows motherly concern for these children of hers, especially those who, through no fault of their own, have been abandoned by their legitimate partner. (*Familiaris Consortio*, 84)

Subsequently, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith addressed this question in its letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Concerning the Reception of Holy Communion by the Divorced and Remarried Members of the Faithful, dated September 14, 1994. In addition to the criteria specified by Saint John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio*, the Congregation highlighted the obligation to avoid giving scandal.

In this light, there are paths to receive the sacraments for those who are divorced and remarried and have not yet received an annulment. The first step to be taken is to lead them to rectify their marriage situation by receiving a declaration of nullity of their previous unions and to validate their marriage. Pope Francis has recently streamlined the procedure, and in January 2015, I eliminated all fees for annulments in the Diocese of Marquette. However, there are some difficult cases in which a declaration of nullity of a previous union cannot be obtained. For example, there might be no proof that the marriage in question was invalid. Yet even for these persons there are some open paths. These are the "certain cases" in which those who are divorced and remarried without an annulment may receive the

Sacraments of Penance and Eucharist. The parties could separate, but even if they cannot separate for a serious reason, such as the need to raise children, they may receive the sacraments when they have repented of their actions and they are willing to abstain from the acts proper to marriage and avoid giving scandal.

We are faced now with the challenging pastoral question. How do we reach out to and accompany those in irregular situations? How do we embrace them and lead them to a deeper union with Christ? It is important to keep in mind that such accompaniment involves the pastoral discernment of a step-by-step approach.

Pope Francis has said:

What we are speaking of is a process of accompaniment and discernment which “guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God. Conversation with the priest, in the internal forum, contributes to the formation of a correct judgment on what hinders the possibility of a fuller participation in the life of the Church and Church practice which can foster it and make it grow. Given that the gradualness is not in the law itself (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 34), this discernment can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity as proposed by the Church.” (AL, 300. The internal citation is from *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 86)

To aid pastoral discernment on how to lead them to a deeper union with Jesus Christ, we must acknowledge that those in irregular situations might not be fully culpable for their situation. Thus, it is not appropriate to scold, but to tenderly embrace and lead them to live in accord with the fullness of truth. Thus, Pope Francis reminds us of mitigating circumstances (cf. AL, 301-303), not to explain away sin, but to heighten our sensitivity to heal the brokenhearted and to lead them toward Jesus. In other words, being mindful of these mitigating circumstances can foster an attitude of care and gentleness and help us avoid “casting the first stone.” For example, many Catholics today have no idea that their marriage is invalid if they marry outside of the Church without a dispensation. Many Catholics today erroneously hold that divorce ends a marriage, so that if they are divorced they are free to remarry. Such persons might enter a new union without knowing that it is wrong.

In order to reach out to those in irregular situations, it is insufficient merely to state the Church’s teaching. In addition, we must strive to meet these persons and accompany them, step-by-step, to walk toward the fullness of truth. Pope Francis says:

At the same time, from our awareness of the weight of mitigating circumstances – psycho-logical, historical and even biological – it follows that “without detracting from the evangelical ideal, there is a need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear”, making room for “the Lord’s mercy, which spurs us on to do our best”. I understand those who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion. But I sincerely believe 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”. The Church’s pastors, in proposing to the faithful the full ideal of the Gospel and the Church’s teaching, must also help them to treat the weak with compassion, avoiding aggravation or unduly harsh or hasty judgements. (AL, 308. Emphasis added. The internal citations are from *Evangelii Gaudium*, 44 and 45.)

In general, conversion and a change of behavior do not happen in an instant. St. Augustine listened to the preaching of St. Ambrose for a considerable time before he finally had a change in heart and embraced a life of chastity. Thus, we must be patient and lead others step-by-step along the way. Let us turn to the Sacred Scriptures and reflect on two examples in the ministry of Jesus to guide our own pastoral ministry.

In the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42), we see a summary of a journey toward faith and discipleship. Notice that Jesus does not begin his conversation with her by pronouncing a moral judgment on her behavior. Rather, he begins with the offer of living water and eternal life. Only after the woman begins to desire this water does the Lord point out the truth of her irregular situation: "You are right in saying, 'I do not have a husband.' For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband." As the woman's journey toward faith continues, Jesus reveals himself to her as the Messiah, and she testifies to others who also come to believe. Observe that conversion, faith and discipleship arise from the encounter with Jesus.

Very explicitly, we see that a personal encounter with Jesus leads to conversion in the life of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). Initially Zacchaeus is curious about Jesus. Then, when Jesus reaches out and expresses his desire to stay with Zacchaeus, a change occurs in Zacchaeus' heart as he says: "Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor; and if I have extorted anything from anyone, I shall repay it four times over." Observe that Zacchaeus' desire to change his behavior arises after he has a personal encounter with Jesus. Similarly, Pope Francis has said:

The example of Jesus is a paradigm for the Church... He began his public ministry with the miracle at the wedding feast of Cana (cf. Jn 2:1-11). He shared in everyday moments of friendship with the family of Lazarus and his sisters (cf. Lk 10:38) and with the family of Peter (cf. Mk 8:14). He sympathized with grieving parents and restored their children to life (cf. Mk 5:41; Lk 7:14-15). In this way he demonstrated the true meaning of mercy, which entails the restoration of the covenant (cf. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 4). This is clear from his conversations with the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 1:4-30) and with the woman found in adultery (cf. Jn 8:1-11), where the consciousness of sin is awakened by an encounter with Jesus' gratuitous love. (AL, 64. The internal citations are from the *Relatio Synodi* 2014, 16 and *Relatio Finalis* 2015, 41)

Likewise, Pope Benedict wrote eloquently of the significance of the personal encounter with Jesus Christ:

We have come to believe in God's love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. Saint John's Gospel describes that event in these words: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should ... have eternal life" (3:16). (*Deus caritas est*, 1)

In this light, the path of accompaniment leads first to a deeper encounter with Jesus and a proclamation of the kerygma. Pope Francis has said:

In and among families, the Gospel message should always resound; the core of that message, the kerygma, is what is “most beautiful, most excellent, most appealing and at the same time most necessary”. This message “has to occupy the center of all evangelizing activity”. It is the first and most important proclamation, “which we must hear again and again in different ways, and which we must always announce in one form or another”. Indeed, “nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wise than that message”. In effect, “all Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the kerygma”. (AL, 58. The internal citations are from *Evangelii Gaudium*, 35 and 164)

In light of the experience of God’s love and with the strength of his grace, people are then able to address sinful behavior. To address the behavior apart from a personal encounter with Jesus and his love is to crush them. The grace of God makes conversion possible. Thus, we must begin the journey of pastoral accompaniment by striving to foster a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Then, we can shepherd people step-by-step to embrace and live the fullness of truth. Pope Francis has said:

“In considering a pastoral approach towards people who have contracted a civil marriage, who are divorced and remarried or simply living together, the Church has the responsibility of helping them understand the divine pedagogy of grace in their lives and offering them assistance so they can reach the fullness of God’s plan for them,” something which is always possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. (AL, 297. The internal citation is from *Relatio Synodi 2014*, 25)

The journey to Jesus Christ is unique for every person and we need to discern best how to lead each one. In this light, I wish to call your attention to the book, *Forming Intentional Disciples*. Herein the author, Sherry Weddell, outlines five stages or thresholds of conversion. This can be a helpful guide for us to discern where a person is on the journey and how with the grace of the Holy Spirit to lead him or her to the next stage.

At this point, I also wish to recommend forming small groups in parishes. These groups can be a fertile ground for faith to grow in the heart of a person who is in an irregular marriage situation. Such a person can participate fully as a member of the group, though not as the group leader. In the small group, the person can experience God’s love through the friendship and support of the other members of the group, and grow in a more authentic discipleship and deeper conversion. In particular, I wish to recommend the program “Alpha”, which centers on the proclamation of the kerygma. For more information, you may contact Deacon Steve Mitchell, National Director of Alpha in the Catholic Context.

catholics@alphausa.org
<http://alphausa.org/>

In addition, some helpful resources on marriage can be found on the websites, “For Your Marriage” and “Marriage Unique for a Reason.”

<http://www.foryourmarriage.org/>
<http://www.marriageuniqueforareason.org/>

It is helpful to remember that, depending on the pastoral situation, sometimes we need to be gentle and sometimes we need to be firm. We observe in the Gospels that Jesus is gentle with some, such as

the woman caught in adultery, and firm with others, such as the Scribes and Pharisees. Here again is another area for discernment. St. Therese provides a good example for us in her work with the novices:

It is impossible to act with all in the same manner. With certain souls, I feel I must make myself little, not fearing to humble myself by admitting my own struggles and defects; seeing I have the same weaknesses as they, my little sisters in their turn admit their faults and rejoice because I understand them through experience. With others, on the contrary, I have seen that to do them any good I must be very firm and never go back on the decision once it is made. To abase oneself would not then be humility but weakness. God has given me the grace not to fear the battle; I must do my duty at all costs. I have heard the following on more than one occasion: "If you want to get anything out of me, you will have to win me with sweetness; force will get you nothing." I myself know that nobody is a good judge in his own case, and that a child, whom a doctor wants to perform a painful operation upon, will not fail to utter loud cries and to say that the remedy is worse than the sickness; however, when he is cured a few days later, he is very happy at being able to play and run. It is exactly the same for souls; soon they recognize that a little bit of bitterness is at times preferable to sugar and they do not fear to admit it. (*Story of a Soul*, ICS Publications, 240)

Finally, when we explain the teaching of the Church, we must remember that it is good news to a broken world. The sexual revolution and the breakdown of marriages lead to barrenness, broken hearts, broken lives and broken families. The Church's teaching, in contrast, fosters steadfast love, fidelity, unity and fruitfulness. This is good news to a broken world! The way to healing is embracing Jesus and his teaching.

In fact, the Church's teaching on marital permanence and fidelity is a specific application of Jesus' commandment: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another." (John 13:34) The love of Jesus for us is unconditional, permanent and ever faithful, and our path to happiness is to receive that love of Jesus and to strive to love others in the same way. Do we not long to be loved with a love that is unconditional, permanent and ever faithful? Though out of human weakness we fall into sin and fail to love others as Jesus does, we know that our path to happiness is joyfully embracing and living this commandment. Thus, we strive with the help of God's grace to turn away from sin and toward Jesus.

Though far from a complete treatment of pastoral accompaniment, I hope that this letter provides a clear direction for your pastoral ministry. In this Year of Mercy, let us open our hearts more deeply to receive God's mercy ourselves, and extend that mercy to others.

With prayers that your hearts be filled with the *Joy of the Gospel*, I am

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ John F. Doerfler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend John F. Doerfler, STD, JCL
Bishop of Marquette

August 4, 2016, Feast of Saint John Vianney