



Ten years after *Amoris laetitia*: *proclaiming the Gospel with families today*

Meeting of the Holy Father Leo XIV
with the Heads of Eastern Churches
and the Presidents of Episcopal Conferences

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Meditation

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Rev. Sr Helen Alford, O.P.

Introduction

At the centre of his *Message* of March 19th that has brought us together today, Pope Leo calls on us to “serve the mission of proclaiming the Gospel of the family to younger generations”. So, I’d like to start these reflections with a little true story, recounted to me by a parish priest here in Rome, which might illustrate, in some way, the “Gospel of the Family”.

One evening, a mother and father were walking with their child along the shores of Lake Trasimeno, which is not far from Assisi, the home of the *Poverello*, the 800th anniversary of whose death we have the joy to celebrate in these days.

The two parents had been thinking that they should start talking to their little son about God.

So, looking up into the evening sky, they began a conversation with him.

“Who do you think is up in the heavens?”, they said. He thought a bit and then said “the birds”. “Yes, yes”, they replied, “but who else?”. He thought a bit more, then said, “the sun”, followed by “the moon” and “the stars”, as his parents continued to prompt him for more answers.

In the end, they said to him, “but don’t you think God is in the heavens too?”, to which he replied, quite firmly, “Oh no, no - God is here, with us”.

Maybe we can see here an example of the younger generations proclaiming the Gospel of the Family to us!

Proclaiming the Gospel of, and to, the Family

A bit later in the same *Message* that we just quoted, Pope Leo calls on us “to proceed, in mutual listening, to synodal discernment on the steps to be taken in order to proclaim the Gospel to families today”. In this meeting, therefore, we are called to proclaim the Gospel both of and to families.

Let’s rest for a moment with that point.

It implies that the family is integral to the proclamation of the Gospel. The family both actively proclaims the Gospel and is in need of receiving the proclamation of the Gospel.

How many of us here today first received the Good News proclaimed by Christ through our families? I know that I did. Pope Francis describes the powerful spiritual and social radiation that family life can have on the world around it, truly proclaiming the Gospel: “When a family is welcoming and reaches out to others, especially the poor and the neglected, it is “a symbol, witness and participant

in the Church's motherhood". Social love, as a reflection of the Trinity, is what truly unifies the spiritual meaning of the family and its mission to others, for it makes present the kerygma in all its communal imperatives. The family lives its spirituality precisely by being at one and the same time a domestic church and a vital cell for transforming the world" (AL 324).

At the same time, many families in situations of suffering and need could derive great help in facing their trials from hearing the Good News proclaimed to them, receiving the new perspective the Gospel gives us on life and, thereby, the grace of the sacraments. The very stresses, tensions and brokenness in family life can be borne with more fortitude and with the hope that they can be worked through by uniting them to the sufferings of Christ. As Pope Francis says, "In the darkest hours of a family's life, union with Jesus in his abandonment can help avoid a breakup" (AL 317).

Pope Leo gives us further help in reflection on the Gospel of and to the Family when he says in his *Message*: "we must learn to evoke the beauty of the vocation to marriage precisely in the recognition of fragility, so as to reawaken "trust in God's grace" (AL 36) and the Christian desire for holiness". The beauty of the vocation to marriage is to be found through and with and in its fragility, not least because weakness can reawaken trust in God, and trust in God awakens the desire for holiness.

This, in a nutshell, is the Gospel of and to the family that we are talking about.

Jesus meets the Samaritan Woman

Beauty and fragility thus co-exist in the Gospel of the family that we are called to proclaim to younger generations, as they do in the Gospel of John where Jesus meets the Samaritan woman.

In this extraordinary encounter, at the hottest moment of the day, Jesus asks a woman who has come to a well for a drink. If she were not in a fragile and irregular family situation, as is confirmed later, she would not be there, so this encounter would never have taken place. She would have come at a cooler time of the day, with the other women. Similarly, Jesus, as a man and a Jew, should not be talking to her. From the geographical and social context, any normal Jewish man would know she was a Samaritan and, almost certainly, a woman of disrepute.

Yet Jesus asks her for a drink, setting in train an amazing sequence of events in which Jesus says openly, for the first time in the Gospel of John, that he is the Messiah, and which ends with the unnamed woman becoming not only the first public evangelist, but also, despite her disrepute, and perhaps precisely because of it, a very effective evangelist. A story that is more connected with proclaiming the Gospel to and through a person in a fragile family situation, with all the beauty that this story holds, could hardly be imagined.

One of my Dominican brothers presents this story as the basic model or paradigm of evangelisation for the Church.¹ He identifies four stages in it, arguing that all of them are important, and that their order is important too.

In a somewhat provocative way (but I think it's a useful provocation) he calls the first stage "flirting" - a conversation between a woman and a man who are both alone. Jesus takes hold of the discussion

¹ The following discussion of this text from the Gospel of John is based on pages 208-211 of the following publication: H. Alford and M. Paluch (2026), "Journeying to the Source. A Global Vision of Evangelization", in P. Ackerman et al (eds), *Religion, Society and Secularization*, Proceedings of the 15th International Conference of the Verbiest Institute KU Leuven, Ferdinand Verbiest Institute for Sino-Mongol Studies, KU Leuven, pp. 201-215.

and transforms it gradually, through his questions, into a meditation on human happiness and fulfilment. For a long time, however, ambiguity persists - one gets the impression that the same words mean different things to Jesus and the Samaritan woman. It is only when the Samaritan woman seems 'won over' by Jesus, that is, when she says to him, "“Sir, give me some of that water, so that I may never get thirsty and never have to come here again to draw water.”" (Jn 4:15), that Jesus initiates stage two, which Paluch calls "the Samaritan woman's confrontation with the truth". Jesus says: "“Go and call your husband . . . and come back here.”"; she answers, honestly, "“I have no husband.”", to which he replies: "“You are right to say, «I have no husband.», for although you have had five, the one you have now is not your husband.”" (Jn 4:16-18). Paluch says of this second stage: "through this painful operation, the Samaritan woman slowly begins to understand that the man she has met is by no means like the others, that this time, unlike what it might have seemed at the beginning, this man is not just flirting", for now she is saying to him: "“I see that you are a prophet, sir”" (Jn 4:19). This then leads to stage three - a short catechesis - a conversation about true worship that leads Jesus to reveal his identity. She says to him: "“I know that Messiah - this is, Christ - is coming”", to which he replies: "“I who am speaking to you . . . I am he”" (Jn 4:25-26). The whole story is thus crowned by stage four - the woman's return to the village from which she came, where she feels driven to share with the other inhabitants what has happened to her, and we are told: "Many Samaritans of that town had believed in him on the strength of the woman's testimony" (Jn 4:39).

We said that the stages and the order are important. First, there is the encounter. Jesus asks for help from her but, as his question leaves her perplexed and makes her want to ask her questions, he willingly answers and thereby awakens in her a desire to know more. The first stage of evangelisation in this model, then, is awakening desire in those who hear us. Then comes the phase that we would like to avoid: facing the brokenness and weakness of our interlocutor, since we, too, know how much we need God's mercy. Yet, according to this model, it is necessary to do that, not in order to condemn, but in order to make the encounter more real and the desire for help more insistent. Only then are we called, in this model, to share what we have to teach. And then, finally, the person evangelised must go out to share what he or she has received with others. This model of evangelisation only concludes with that phase, not with the catechesis.

We might gain even more insight from this Gospel text if we look at it in another way, using the "gaze" of Jesus. This is an idea much-beloved of Pope Francis, which he uses in many places, including the end of the chapter on the Theology of Creation in *Laudato si'*. Firstly, the gaze of Jesus places us in relation with God the Father, to whom we are of great importance, as this quotation from the Gospel of Matthew attests: "Look at the birds of the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they are?" (Mt 6: 26-27). With his first question to her, Jesus turns the lonely Samaritan woman, who comes to the well at that time in order to avoid everybody else, into a person worth speaking to, and into someone worthy of trust, as he asks her for help. By helping her regain her sense of her own importance, he opens her up to the possibility that she could be really loved by God her Father. Secondly, the gaze of Jesus values the everyday world around us, recognising its beauty and wonder. By listening to her, answering her questions and gradually leading her to new insight, Jesus shows that this ordinary, everyday encounter with this ordinary and fragile woman can be full of beauty and wonder. Thirdly, in his gaze, Jesus embraces the world as his creation, but through the Incarnation, he also embraces it as its Redeemer. In his encounter with this woman, Jesus sees her in her full, created reality, with all its flaws, but also offers her the Good News and the promise of new life that it brings. Finally, in

his gaze, Jesus sees a world that he is going to deliver over to his Father at the end of time, “so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). In his gaze on this woman, he is calling her to await with anticipation the full revelation of the kingdom of God.

If we think about these four dimensions of the gaze of Jesus, we can note that all of them are drawing us into new or deepened relationships: a new or deepened relation with God the Father, with the everyday world, with creation and redemption, and to the new heavens and the new earth that one day will come.

This “relational” gaze of Jesus is highly significant, because in order to “see” relationships, we have to be looking for them. We do not “see” relations in themselves, like we see physical objects, and yet they are really there. They are like the air we breathe - the air is also really there, but we do not see it. They are like the virus that is really there, but we do not see it unless we have the help of a highly specialised instrument like an electron microscope. These things are invisible to us, yet they are real. The “relational gaze” allows our otherwise hidden relationships to be seen, which is of fundamental importance for the family since human social reality, and the family in the first place, is made up of relations. In the highly unstable world we live in today, if we are going to help young people have the courage to enter into marriage, and to give them the capacity to cope with the stresses they are going to meet, they will need to “see” their relationships and think about their marriage and family life in a relational way. This should be no surprise to us here, given the tremendous importance of relation in Trinitarian theology and that we are told in Genesis that we are made in the image and likeness of God.

Familiaris Consortio and Amoris Laetitia

Pope Francis mentions the Samaritan woman four times in *Amoris Laetitia*. In *Familiaris consortio*, the other great post-conciliar apostolic exhortation on the family, Pope John Paul II does not mention her directly, but he does reference parts of the discussion between Jesus and her (FC 39). It is noteworthy that in the *Message* to which we have just referred, Pope Leo presents both of these exhortations as having “strengthened the Church’s doctrinal and pastoral commitment to the service of young people, married couples and families.”

One of the ideas that link the two documents is that of the “law of gradualness” proposed by Pope John Paul II in *Familiaris consortio* and presented again by Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia*: “Saint John Paul II proposed the so-called “law of gradualness” in the knowledge that the human being “knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth” (FC 34). This is not a “gradualness of law” but rather a gradualness in the prudential exercise of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law. For the law is itself a gift of God which points out the way, a gift for everyone without exception; it can be followed with the help of grace” (AL 295). In both texts, then, the two Popes are concerned to maintain the ideal, “law [which] is a gift of God which points out the way”, as well as to recognise that many are not able to fully “understand, appreciate or [...] carry out the objective demands of the law”. Thirty five years separate the two documents, during which the lived situation of Christian family life has been through many new developments. As in other cases, such as in the social teaching of the Church, when social situations are turbulent and changing quickly, it can be necessary to find new ways of putting together both the “objective demands of the law” (AL 295) and

the “law of gradualness” (FC 34) that many experience in trying to enter into it. Both *Familiaris consortio* and *Amoris Laetitia* try to do this in their different historical contexts.

Let us not forget that St Thomas Aquinas and all the tradition that goes back to him would say that the Law of God reaches its greatest expression in the New Law, the Law of the Gospel: the Grace of Jesus. In this sense, the last chapter of *Amoris Laetitia* which focuses on the spirituality of marriage, “a spirituality of supernatural communion”, is so significant because it places marriage within the call to sanctity, the goal of every Christian life.

Conclusion

We can end where we began, with Pope Leo’s call to us to find ways to “serve the mission of proclaiming the Gospel of the family to younger generations”.

Let us search for ways to encourage young people to take up the great challenge of marriage and family life, embracing it in the full knowledge that they will experience great fragility as part of the process of realising its beauty, and that in that fragility, they will find new and unexpected sources of God’s grace and experience a desire for holiness that is their very own.

Let us join Jesus in calling them to rise to the challenge, like Jesus called the Samaritan woman, of proclaiming the Gospel to others, precisely in the recognition of their fragility, so as to call others to join them in trusting in God’s grace and in experiencing the Christian desire for holiness.

And let us listen to the call we received from the little child at the beginning, reminding us not to look for God elsewhere, but to recognise his presence in our very ordinary, everyday family life.

Let us conclude with some questions that may help us enter into the shared reflections of the days ahead:

Where and how can we recognise God already at work in the lives of families?

What can we learn from families, in their beauty and their fragility?

How can we proclaim the Gospel not only to families, but also with them, encouraging them to proclaim actively the Gospel of the family?