

WHAT MAY WE EXPECT FROM THE FAMILY?¹

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“In the Church, the ideal is always an incarnate ideal,
because the Word, the Logos, has become flesh and
accompanies our lives in the sacraments.”



What may we expect from the family? Surveys confirm that there remains in our time a great desire for family. This means that much is still expected from the family. But is this a well-founded expectation? A great desire does not in itself guarantee the happiness that is wished for. And when we look at the crisis of the family, we find that many of these desires suffer shipwreck. With sorrow we are thinking of the crisis of so many broken families, the worrying decline in birth rates in many countries, the children who are neither accepted nor educated by their parents. This leads us to reverse the terms of the question: In whom can the family place its hope? What is the basis of this great desire that resonates within the heart? These questions also pose a challenge for Christians: Can families hope in the Church? And what can they expect from her?

1. This essay was originally a lecture delivered at the Oviedo Metropolitan Seminary, in Spain, on May 4, 2016. The original style has been retained.

In presenting this part of my book on hope,² that is, in addressing the question of what we can expect from the family, I draw on the message of hope for the family contained in Pope Francis's post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia*. Like the Holy Father, I do not begin with a sociological inquiry but with a biblical narrative about the family, so that the word of God can be heard.³

1. CHURCH AND FAMILY: NOAH'S ARK

The story of Noah is the tale of a family. For, with Noah, God does not simply save an individual: Noah, his wife, his sons, and his daughters-in-law enter the picture. The ark itself is not in the form of a ship but a house, the symbol of the family (Gn 6:15). It is also represented this way in Christian art.

At the same time, the threats against the family and society as a whole were omnipresent in Noah's time. An ancient Jewish legend describes the generation of the flood as prosperous and privileged:⁴ people lived in affluence and were dependent only on themselves. They had the power to manipulate nature. God was increasingly forgotten. Pregnancies were short, and the children were strong and already grown up at birth. They even helped cut their own umbilical cord. This is a revealing image: these self-sufficient people did not belong to any family. They did not need to learn from others because they were enclosed in their self-sufficiency. Against this background, the flood appears not simply as a divine punishment but as a logical consequence of sin.

In this situation, only the mercy of God could give hope. God transformed the suffering of the flood into fruitfulness. From the waters that symbolize a mother's womb, a new people was reborn, purified from evil. God expressed his mercy through a family and their dwelling, the ark. Here true love

2. See Gerhard Ludwig Müller, *The Hope of the Family* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014).

3. *Amoris laetitia* (= *AL*), chap. 1.

4. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), vol. 1, 152.

was rediscovered and lived. God blessed Noah as he had blessed Adam and Eve in their time (Gn 8:15–17).

A first lesson from this biblical narrative is the realization that to rediscover the original plan of God for the family means to rediscover hope. In hope God provides a foundation for the desire we experience for the fullness of life. God builds a dwelling, an ark, in which each person recognizes his origin and end. Each family retains traces of the divine hands, the loving providence of God, the gift of his original love. In the ark of the family we learn to be children again, to receive from others, to accept our own body as a witness to the original gift of God, to speak the language of sexual difference as open to life (*AL*, 285).

The water of the flood, for its part, speaks of the non-binding, formless, and unstable relationships of postmodernity. These liquid relationships dissolve and begin again in manifold disjointed connections. If one has no deeper reference, the contemporary desire for a family ends up becoming self-defeating. One is not able to grow and arrive at the goal that is promised. The desire for family then expresses itself in the so-called “models” or various forms of the family in which the ordering of affections is lost. In the midst of this ideological flood, Noah’s ark, the family dwelling, appears as the place where desire is awakened, accepted, healed, and reaffirmed in relation to its end.

But we can ask ourselves, does God save only a few privileged individuals? If we consider the family narrative of Noah in connection with biblical history, we find that God desires the salvation of many by means of the few. The remnant of eight persons is the seed for a new humanity. In fact, it is not just a family but a whole nation that will make the earth habitable again. The ark, the family sphere in which man finds his vocation and his end, cannot be reduced to an isolated family. The family has a social vocation, and every society is called to become a place and a culture where God’s original love is remembered and where faithful love is possible. If this social ark—the “culture of the family”—were to disappear, people would strive in vain to escape the deluge of noncommitted love.

A first reading of *Amoris laetitia* also helps us to discover that the problem of today’s family is not primarily about individual efforts, personal convictions, or isolated gestures. The great challenge is to overcome the lack of an appropriate realm

or culture, a fabric of relationships in which the desire of human persons can germinate and grow. Noah's ark and its structure, designed by God, is at the same time a dwelling house and a ship that travels through the waters. The fixed and waterproof boards with their different levels represent the culture of the family. This culture is safeguarded above all through the indissoluble love between a man and a woman who are open to the transmission and education of life. Later one lives in a society that accompanies families and strengthens their relationships.

Here we see the great task and challenge of the Church in connection with the family. The Christian tradition has seen Noah's ark as an image of the Church: it is the remnant, the sacrament of salvation and shelter for all people who are saved from the flood.⁵ Just as the family is the sphere where love is born and grows, where desire is directed and purified, the Church is called to become a great family, a great sphere, a great ark, where all families find a place to live and grow. The family must live within the Church where it is reminded of the great vocation it has received, where the love that fills it with life and nourishment is remembered. On the other hand, in the context of a world of nonbinding relationships, the Church must be able to create a favorable home, a sphere and a culture in which the family can grow. Is this possible? What new hope does the Church give to the family and through the family to society? We can discover the answer in the original design of the ark of the Church.

2. THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE ARK: THE LOVE OF CHRIST IN THE FAMILY

Chapter four of *Amoris laetitia* summarizes the hope of the family through an exegesis of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In my view, this is the key to understanding the apostolic exhortation. Here we see that only in the light of true and faithful love (*AL*,

5. On Noah's ark as an image of the Church in the Church Fathers, see Jean Daniélou, "Noah and the Flood," in *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1960); Hugo Rahner, *Symbole der Kirche: Die Ekklesiologie der Vater* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1964).

67) is it possible to “learn how to love” (*AL*, 208) and to prepare a home for desire.

From the abundance of practical advice that is offered in Pope Francis’s commentary, I would like to underline a key element: the power to forgive is founded on the forgiveness that each individual has received from God in Christ. We also find these christological statements in Paul: “Christ died for us when we were still sinners” (Rom 5:8), or “what can separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom 8:35). Paul does not conceive of love as an abstraction or as a beautiful goal that is far away or barely accessible. On the contrary, love has a name, a face, and a certain tone of voice, for it is Jesus of Nazareth himself, “my crucified love.”⁶ When the reflection on love in 1 Corinthians 13 concludes with the claim that “love never ceases,” we fully understand what this is about: the love of Christ that is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5).

On this sure foundation, on this hope that does not perish (Rom 5:5), Francis proposes to build a solid culture of the family. The Church Fathers also interpreted Noah’s ark in christological terms. By surrendering himself on the Cross to save us, Christ crossed the waters of death to form a new nation. The wood that crossed the water was interpreted in relation to the Cross and baptism: the love for mankind Christ expresses on the Cross touches us in baptism and the other sacraments. We are given a new capacity to be loved as well as to love.

Augustine saw the basic architecture of Noah’s ark in the sacramental order of the Church, which is the body of Christ, with baptism as a great door.⁷ The Church can set forth on the sea because the nave, the mast, and the sail take the form of the love of Jesus mediated in the sacraments. Thus the Church is able to create a new realm, a new culture, a new practice to accompany families in the world.

Here we can discover the great hope of the family. This hope consists in the great gift every family has received in the sacrament of marriage, through which spouses become an effective sign of the love of Jesus and his Church. If the family has

6. This expression of Ignatius of Antioch (*Ad Rome* 7.2) is later explained by Origen in the preface to his commentary on the Song of Songs.

7. Augustine, *De fide et operibus* 27.49. I will return to this text later.

hope, it is because of this gift received from God, which renews various relationships. It is true that each spouse on his or her own, and also the two spouses together, know that the hymn to love exceeds them. But they also understand that the sacrament takes up and transforms their love. It is the task of the Church to remind them and teach them that they can say together: “With Jesus, who is truly present in our love, we are long-suffering, we are kind; with Jesus, who is really present in our love, we do not feel envy, we do not boast and do not puff up; with Jesus, who is truly present in our love, we do not act unseemly or seek only our own advantage.”

This means that every Christian family is accepted into the ark of Jesus; each family receives the love of Jesus and the Church as a new realm or dwelling. It is true that the relationship between the spouses must grow and mature; they will fall and must be forgiven. From this point of view, the relationship will always be unfinished and on pilgrimage. On the other hand, as a sacrament, marriage gives the spouses the full presence and love of Jesus among them—the bond of an indissoluble love unto death, as indissoluble as the bond between Christ and his Church. The family can become the subject of the life of the Church, not because the spouses are very effective, intelligent, or just, but because they possess the strength of the love of Christ. It is Christ who has introduced a new love into the world so that desire can find its goal and its fullness.

In this light, the pope insists that the pastoral care of marriage be “a pastoral care of the bond” (*AL*, 211). In contrast to an emotional pastoral care, which merely attempts to arouse feelings or is content to convey personal experiences in the encounter with God, pastoral care of the bond prepares for the “yes forever.” Marriage preparation is guided by this light: to accompany the stages of a relationship so that young people learn to give themselves by saying “yes,” so that they accept God’s plan for them. When the bond is cherished, love goes beyond itself. It overcomes fluctuating sentiments and becomes strong enough to support society and welcome children. It is again a matter of preparing the family as a dwelling where marriage is the keystone. In the bond, the individualism of the spouses or the couple is overcome and there arises a culture of the family, a realm in which love can flourish, Noah’s ark. In this way they can survive

the flood of noncommittal postmodernity. The Church assures the spouses: whatever the circumstances or situation you find yourselves in, I will watch over the bond. I will secure it and protect it, so that it may remain alive, so that you can always return to it, because it is your deepest vocation.

From here, we can see the insight with which Pope Francis speaks of what he calls the “Christian ideal.” Some have regarded this ideal as something remote, as an abstract goal intended for only a few. But this is not his way of thinking. The pope is not a Platonist! On the contrary, for him, Christianity touches human flesh (see *Evangelii gaudium*, 88, 233). This is especially clear when Francis warns against presenting “a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families” (*AL*, 36). Here the pope rejects the idea that the ideal is something abstract and artificial.

So what does the pope mean when he speaks of the ideal of marriage? In the Church, the ideal is always an incarnate ideal, because the Word, the Logos, has become flesh and accompanies our lives in the sacraments. This living and transforming presence of the perfect love of Jesus exists precisely in the sacraments. As I mentioned, they contain the architecture of Noah’s ark. *Amoris laetitia* speaks several times about the relationship between Christian initiation and marriage (*AL*, 84, 192, 206–07, 279), as well as the connection between the Eucharist and marriage (*AL*, 318). We can draw the conclusion that each family and the whole Church should reckon with this culture of the love of Jesus, which is contained in the sacramental order. These remain as a living sign of Christ to bring forth his life among men. They are the architecture of the ark, an ark whose dimensions were given by God.

As I said earlier, our time, characterized by diffuse desires, needs a culture of love. The Church promotes this culture of love precisely in her sacraments, which provide the foundation. She can offer hope to all men, even the most distant, as long as she remains faithful to this dwelling she received from Christ, as long as she promotes this universal culture of the love of Christ which is made known in the sacramental signs. The sacraments are the architecture of the ship that takes us to safe harbor.

The image of Noah’s ark, the Church, which travels on the sea and carries hope into the world, is connected with the

number eight. It symbolizes the eighth day, the day of the Resurrection of Christ, the beginning of the future world. In this way, it was shown that the Church is not only journeying toward a distant completion, but that the fullness of love has already begun in her. Yes, it is possible to live the love of which Paul speaks in his hymn of love. We do not need to wait until the end of time. It is possible to live this love already now, because the Church in her sacraments receives a dwelling as the original gift of Christ, alive and effective, a dwelling that takes up our meager abilities and supports and strengthens them.

3. TO GATHER THE FARTHEST INTO THE ARK: ACCOMPANY, DISCERN, INTEGRATE

Against the background of the broad horizon of a culture of love, we can illuminate a question that the pope addresses in *Amoris laetitia*: How can individuals who live some distance from the Church be given hope? There is a particular concern for those who have experienced the drama and the wound of a civil marriage after divorce. They are, so to speak, those who suffered shipwreck in the flood of postmodernity, who forgot the marriage promise with which they had sealed their love forever in Christ. Can they return to the ark, built on the love of Christ, and escape the flood waters? For this task of the Church, the pope points the way forward in three words: accompaniment, discernment, integration (*AL*, 291–92). These words provide the key for reading the eighth chapter of *Amoris laetitia*.

3.1. *Accompaniment: The ark, which remains above water and travels the sea*

First of all, the task is to accompany. These baptized Catholics are not excluded from the Church. On the contrary, the Church as the new Noah's ark takes them in, even if their life does not correspond to the words of Jesus. Augustine describes the carrying capacity of Noah's ark as a symbol of the Church. First of all, it was not only the pure animals that entered the ark. For Augustine, this meant that the Church harbored both the righteous and sinners. She consists of people who fall and get up again,

who must say at the beginning of each Mass, “I confess.” This is why the Catholic Church rejects the view of the Donatists, who advocated for a “Church of the pure” in which there is no place for sinners. Only at the end of time will God separate the wheat from the weeds, including the weeds that germinate in every believer.

According to Augustine, both pure and impure animals entered through the same door. They lived under the same roof.⁸ Here, the Bishop of Hippo refers both to the sacraments (with baptism as the door) as well as the change of life demanded by those who wish to receive them. One must give up sin. For Augustine, through the harmony between the sacraments and the visible life of Christians, the Church not only testifies Christ’s form of life to the world but also shows how the members of the body of Jesus are called to live.⁹ Thus the consistency between the sacraments and the lives of Christians ensures that the culture of the sacraments remains habitable. The Church lives within this culture and proposes this culture to the world. Only in this way can the Church take up sinners; she receives them immediately and invites them to a certain way of life so that they may overcome sin. However, what the Church can never lose is the sacramental order. Otherwise, she would lose the original gift which preserves her; she would no longer make visible the love of Jesus, nor the way and manner in which this love changes the lives of Christians. It is precisely with her acceptance of the sacramental order that the Church avoids two paths that would lead to a “Church of the pure”: namely, by excluding either the sinner or the idea of sin.

Therefore, the first key to the path of accompaniment is the harmony between the celebration of the sacraments and Christian life. Herein lies the reason for the discipline regarding

8. Augustine, *De fide et operibus* 27.49: “The entering of unclean animals into the ark as a prediction that there would be evil men in the Church and that they should be tolerated, but without allowing any corruption of doctrine or breakdown of discipline. For the unclean animals did not force their way into the ark, nor did they enter by whatever entrance they pleased, but through the one entrance which Noah had built” (English translation in *On Faith and Works*, trans. Gregory J. Lombardo, Ancient Christian Writers [Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 1988], 55).

9. Augustine, *De fide et operibus* 9.14.

the Eucharist as it has always been preserved by the Church. Thanks to this discipline, the Church can be a community that accompanies the sinner and welcomes him, without thereby approving of sin. This discipline provides the foundation for a possible path of discernment and integration. John Paul II has confirmed this discipline in *Familiaris consortio*, 84, and *Reconciliatio et poenitentia*, 34. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith also confirmed it in its document of 1994.¹⁰ Benedict XVI deepened it in *Sacramentum caritatis*, 29. We are dealing here with the consolidated teaching of the Magisterium, which is based upon Holy Scripture and the teaching of the Church: the harmony of the sacraments, which is necessary for the salvation of souls and the heart of the “culture of the bond” as lived by the Church.

There have been different claims that *Amoris laetitia* has rescinded this previous discipline because it allows, at least in certain cases, the reception of the Eucharist by remarried divorcees without requiring that they change their way of life in accord with *Familiaris consortio*, 84 (by giving up their new bond or by living as brother and sister). The following has to be said in this regard: if *Amoris laetitia* had intended to rescind such a deeply rooted and weighty discipline, it would have expressed itself in a clear manner and it would have given reasons. However, there is no such statement in *Amoris laetitia*. Nowhere does the pope call into question the arguments of his predecessors. These arguments are not based upon the subjective guilt of our brothers and sisters, but rather upon the visible, objective manner of life that is in opposition to the words of Christ.

But someone may object, is this change not indicated by a footnote (no. 351)? This footnote states that the Church can offer the help of the sacraments to those who live in an objective situation of sin.¹¹ Without entering into this question more

10. “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Concerning the Reception of Holy Communion by the Divorced and Remarried Members of the Faithful” (Rome, 14 September 1994), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_14091994_rec-holy-comm-by-divorced_en.html.

11. “Objective situation of sin” is a very general expression. The situation may be hidden, for example. It can also be that someone is in a process of remedying the situation, which is why he does not obstinately persist in it.

substantially, it is sufficient to point out that this footnote refers in a general way to objective situations of sin, and not to the specific cases of the civilly remarried divorcees. This is because this latter situation has its own distinctive characteristics, which differentiate it from other situations. These divorced people live contrary to the sacrament of marriage and therefore to the sacramental order, which has its center in the Eucharist. This is also the reason given by the Magisterium to justify the discipline concerning the Eucharist as set forth in *Familiaris consortio*, 84. This argument does not appear in the footnote or in its context. Accordingly, footnote 351 does not touch upon the prior discipline. The norms of *Familiaris consortio*, 84, and *Sacramentum caritatis*, 29, and their application in all cases remain valid.¹²

The term “irregular situation” is just as general. In itself, the expression simply means that someone is outside a norm. But it is not distinguished whether it is a norm of ecclesiastical or divine law. In any case, it should be recalled that, according to Catholic hermeneutics, if there is any doubt about the interpretation of a document, the only possible reading is one that follows what the previous Magisterium has taught.

12. It was also claimed that footnote 336 seemed to open up this possibility. This footnote contains a very general comment. It merely states that a canonical norm (even in the sacramental order) does not necessarily have the same effects for all because in some cases subjective guilt is diminished. Note the language of “not necessarily.” This means that there can be norms that do indeed have the same effects for everyone. This is undeniably the case, for example, in the norm that precludes the non-baptized from receiving any of the other sacraments. This is a canonical norm that is applied in every case and for which the Church cannot make an exception. This norm belongs to the sacramental order. Such a norm does not depend on the individual’s subjective guilt but on his or her objective condition as non-baptized. However, other norms in the sphere of the sacraments have different effects depending on the individual’s subjective guilt. An example here is the requirement to receive the sacrament of confession before Holy Communion when there is a serious sin. In some cases, for important reasons someone can receive Holy Communion by doing an act of repentance and resolving to go to confession as soon as possible. The norm from *Familiaris consortio*, 84, however, belongs to the first kind. It does not depend on the individual’s subjective guilt but on his or her objective condition. This is how the Magisterium has always explained this norm. This footnote does not therefore contradict the validity of *Familiaris consortio*, 84 as exceptionless. Footnote 336 concerns the norms mentioned in *AL*, 299, that is, various public offices in the Church. These offices also pertain to the sacramental order insofar as they involve a liturgical service (such as the office of lector or godparent). A baptized individual may be admitted to these offices when it becomes clear that they are on the path of repentance and that such authorization would help them.

The principle is that no one can truly want to receive a sacrament—the Eucharist—without at the same time having the will to live according to all the other sacraments, including the sacrament of marriage. Whoever lives in a way that contradicts the marital bond opposes the visible sign of the sacrament of marriage. With regard to his bodily existence, he turns himself into a “counter-sign” of indissolubility, even if he or she is not subjectively guilty. Precisely because one’s bodily existence is in opposition to the sign, one cannot participate in the higher eucharistic sign—a sign that manifests the incarnate love of Christ—by receiving Communion. If the Church were to admit such a person to Communion, she would be committing an act Thomas Aquinas calls “a falseness in the sacred sacramental signs.”¹³ This is not an exaggerated conclusion drawn from doctrine, but rather the very foundation of the sacramental constitution of the Church, which we have compared to the architecture of Noah’s ark. The Church cannot change this architecture because it stems from Jesus himself, and because the Church was constituted and is supported in this way in order to be able to traverse the waters of the flood. To change the discipline on this specific point and thus admit a contradiction between the Eucharist and the sacrament of marriage would necessarily mean to change the Church’s profession of faith. The blood of the martyrs has been shed for the confession of faith in the indissolubility of marriage—not as a distant ideal, but as a concrete manner of conduct.

Perhaps someone might ask, by not taking this step, has Pope Francis failed to do something merciful? Is it not unacceptable to ask these people to lead a life according to the teachings of Jesus? It is rather the opposite. Allow me to stay with the image of the ark: Francis has opened all the windows because he is aware of the deluge in which the current world lives. He has invited all of us to let ropes down from these windows so that the shipwrecked can enter the ship. However, to admit someone to Communion who lives in a way that is visibly in opposition to the sacrament of marriage—even if it were only in a few individual cases—would not be to open an additional window. It would be as if someone had drilled a hole into the bottom of the ship and thereby allowed seawater to enter in. The seafaring of

13. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 68, a. 4.

all would thus be endangered and the Church's service to society would be called into question. Instead of a way of integration, this would be a way of destruction of the ecclesial ark, a leak. If the discipline is respected, there are no limits to the Church's capacity to rescue families. Additionally, this safeguards the stability of the ship as well as the capacity to lead us safely to the harbor. The architecture of the ark is necessary, especially so that the Church does not permit someone to remain in a situation that is in opposition to Jesus' own words of eternal life, and so that the Church "does not condemn anyone forever" (*AL*, 296–97). The preservation of the structure of the ark preserves, as it were, our common house, the Church. She is built on the love of Jesus. This preserves the family culture or atmosphere that is necessary for her pastoral care of the family and for her service to society. In this way, we return to what we have regarded as the center of the Church's hope for the family: the need to create a culture of the family, to offer a home for desire and love. A "culture of the bond" should be promoted, parallel to the "pastoral care of the bond" of which the pope speaks. In our postmodern society, only the Church creates this culture, which reveals the immeasurable pastoral value of the Church's discipline.

In the last few years, we have often discussed the possibility of admitting to Holy Communion those who civilly remarried after divorce. At the beginning of *Amoris laetitia*, the pope noted some extremes to be avoided. Many and very different arguments were presented. At the same time, one ran the risk of not seeing the forest for the trees of casuistry. It may be helpful to gain some distance and look at the question from a wider perspective, setting aside more detailed questions. If the Church were to admit remarried divorcees to Holy Communion, allowing them to remain in their situation without demanding a change in their way of life, should one not then simply say that she has accepted divorce in some cases? Certainly, on paper, she would not accept it. She would continue to consider marriage an ideal. But does society today not also consider it an ideal? How, then, would the Church be different? Could she then still claim to have remained faithful to the words of Jesus, which, even at the time, were considered hard to accept? Were not his words also in opposition to the culture and the practice of his time, which allowed for divorce in certain cases in order to adapt

to human weakness? In practice, the indissolubility of marriage would remain merely a beautiful formula, because it would no longer be manifestly confessed in the Eucharist, the true place where the Christian truths are confessed—truths that relate to life and form the public witness of the Church.

We must ask ourselves, have we not considered this problem too much from the point of view of the individual? We can all understand the desire of our brothers and sisters to be admitted to Communion. We can understand the difficulties of giving up their new connection or living this relationship in another way. From the point of view of the individual with his or her concrete history, we might think, would it be so difficult for us to admit them to Communion? In my opinion, we have forgotten to look at things from a higher point of view, from the Church as a communion, from her common good. On the one hand, marriage is essentially social. If the understanding of marriage is changed in some cases, it must also be changed in all others. If there were cases in which a marriage could be broken, should we not tell the young people who want to marry that these exceptions apply to them? Will not those spouses who are struggling to stay together, but who also experience the burden of the journey and the temptation to give up, perceive this immediately? On the other hand, the Eucharist also has a social structure (see *AL*, 185–86). It depends not only on one's subjective conditions but also on the relationship between the Church and the Eucharist. In the long run, understanding marriage and the Eucharist as something individual, unrelated to the common good of the Church, will dissolve the very culture of the family. It would be as if Noah, when seeing the shipwrecked people around the ark, started taking apart the bottom of the ship and its sides in order to distribute wooden planks. The Church would forfeit her character as a community, which is based upon the ontology of the sacraments. She would turn into a collection of individuals who swim aimlessly around at the mercy of the waves.

The civilly remarried divorcees who abstain from receiving the Eucharist and who try to renew their desires in harmony with the Eucharist protect the house of the Church, our common house. It is beneficial for them, too, to preserve the walls of the ark, the house that contains the sign of the love of Jesus. Thus the Church can remind them: "Do not remain where

you are. It is also possible for you; you are not excluded from returning to the sacramental covenant that you have entered, even if this takes time. With the power of God, you can live in fidelity to him.” If anyone protests that this is not possible, we can think of the words of *Amoris laetitia*: “Surely it is possible because it is what the gospel requires” (*AL*, 102). No one is excluded from the path to the great life of Jesus. The wish to receive Communion can lead to a renewal of desire with the help of a pastor (and here the path of discernment opens) so that we may live according to the words of the Lord.

In the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, the pope ultimately warns us of two errors. On the one hand, there are those who want to condemn. They are satisfied with a stiff attitude that does not open up new paths for these people to renew their hearts. On the other hand, there are those who see the solution in finding exceptions in various cases. They renounce the renewal of the hearts of men and women. Is it not necessary to go beyond these options and adopt a different standpoint? This point of view is the Church’s communion, the common good of the Church. This point of view places the life of Christ as shared in the sacraments at the center of the culture of the family. If we damage the construction of Noah’s ark, how can we be sure that it will not sink? How can we be sure that Christian hope will not suffer shipwreck for all families?

3.2. *Discern and integrate*

Regarding the culture of the family, which is based on the structure of the ark, we can ask ourselves, what new paths has *Amoris laetitia* invited us to open? The pope encourages us to discern and integrate.

We ask first about discernment. Some have suggested that, if the pope calls for greater consideration of mitigating circumstances, he requires that the discernment be based on these factors, as if it were possible to find out whether someone is subjectively guilty or not. Such discernment is ultimately impossible because only God sees into the hearts of men. Moreover, the sacramental order is an order of visible signs, not of inner attitudes or subjective guilt. A privatization of the sacramental order

would certainly not be Catholic. It is not a matter of discerning a purely inner attitude, but, according to St. Paul, of “discerning the body” (1 Cor 11:29; cf. *AL*, 185–86), the concrete visible relationships in which we live.

This means that the Church does not leave us alone in this discernment. The text of *Amoris laetitia* gives us the key criteria to begin practicing this discernment. The first criterion is the goal, the aim of discernment. It is the goal that the Church proclaims to everyone in every case and in every situation. It is not to be silenced by human considerations nor by fear of confronting the world’s way of thinking. The pope lays out this criterion in paragraph 307. It consists in faithfully returning to the marriage bond, entering again into the dwelling or ark where the mercy of God encounters man’s love and desire. The whole process seeks, step by step and with patience and mercy, to acknowledge and heal the wound from which these brothers and sisters suffer. This wound is not simply the failure of the previous marriage, but also the new partnership.

Therefore, discernment is necessary not in order to select a goal, but to choose the path. When we realize where we want to bring the other (in the fullness of life that Jesus promises), the paths are differentiated, so that, depending on the individual case, each one can get there via different paths. The second criterion mentioned by the pope is the logic of growth through small steps (*AL*, 305). It is of crucial importance that remarried divorcees refrain from establishing themselves in their position, that they do not make peace with the new partnership in which they live. In this way they are ready to allow the light of the words of Jesus to illuminate their way. Any movement aiming at ending this way of life is a small step of growth, which must be encouraged and supported.

Anyone who hopes to consume Jesus in the Eucharist will also want to consume his words and integrate them into his life, to use a biblical image. Or, rather, according to Augustine, he will be formed by them.¹⁴ For it is not Jesus who conforms to our desire but vice versa: our desire is called to become one with Jesus, in order to find in him its full realization.

14. Augustine, *Confessions* 7.10.16: “I am the food of strong men; grow, and you shall feed upon me; nor shall you convert me, like the food of your flesh, into you, but you shall be converted into me.”

From here we can turn to the third word, “integrate,” and examine the new paths opened by *Amoris laetitia* for the divorced and remarried. In the wake of the 2014 and 2015 Synods, the pope asks us to develop a process in every diocese according to the doctrine of the Church and the directives of the bishop (*AL*, 300). This should be done by means of a team of qualified and experienced shepherds.

It is vitally important that the word of God be proclaimed in this process, especially in relation to marriage (*AL*, 297). Thus these baptized Catholics will gradually bring light into the second union they have entered and in which they live. Here, too, the possibility of a declaration of nullity according to the new norms adopted by the pope should be considered.

In this way, there is also another novelty which the pope has introduced in *Amoris laetitia*. Without changing the general canonical norm, the pope recognizes that there may be exceptions to the current prohibition against taking on certain public tasks in the Church by remarried divorcees. As I said before, the yardstick is the individual’s advancement along the path of healing.

In this process it should also be remembered that the sacraments are not only a discreet celebration but a path or journey. Anyone who enters on the path of repentance is already pursuing a sacramental process. He is not excluded from the sacramental order of the Church. In a way, he already receives the help of the sacraments. It is important once again to be transformed by Jesus, even if one knows that the path will be long, and it is important for us to accompany him along this path. The Good Shepherd fosters a desire to introduce the person concerned into the culture of the bond, to make his desire a dwelling, so that we can be renewed according to the Lord’s words.

The pope invites us along a path. Therein lies the key. Eucharistic communion is at the end of the path. It will come at the moment when God wills. For he acts in the lives of the baptized and helps them to renew their desires according to the Gospel. Let us begin step by step by helping them to participate in the Church’s life until they “reach for themselves the fullness of the divine plan” (*AL*, 297).

Amid the waters of postmodernity, the Church, like Noah’s ark, can offer hope to all families and to the whole of

society. She recognizes weakness and the necessity of conversion on the part of her members. It is precisely for this reason that she is called to preserve the concrete presence of the love of Jesus. This love is alive and effective in the sacraments, which give structure and dynamism to the ark and enable it to travel on the sea. The key—and this is no small challenge—is to develop an “ecclesial culture of the family,” which should be a “culture of the sacramental bond.”

According to St. John Chrysostom, Noah’s ark is different from the Church in one important respect.¹⁵ For the old ark included irrational animals (*alogos*), and they remained unreasonable. The Church also receives those who have lost the Logos (reason) through sin, and who have therefore become “unreasonable,” wandering without the light of love. It is precisely because the Church has the life of the body of Christ, because she preserves the harmony of the sacraments, that, unlike Noah’s ark, she is able to renew man, to shape the human heart according to the word (*logos*) of Jesus. People enter her as “unreasonable” and come out as “reasonable.” That is, they are ready to live according to the light of Christ, according to his love, which “hopes for all,” and which “will remain forever.”—*Translated by Nicholas J. Healy Jr.* □

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15. John Chrysostom, *Hom. Laz.* 6 (PG 48, 1037–38).