

REV. ZBIGNIEW WANAT

Nicolaus Copernicus University  
in Toruń

ORCID: 0000-0002-6352-8377

## Searching for People and Accompanying them on their Journey Back. Notes on the Margins of the Pastoral Guidelines for Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* of the Polish Episcopal Conference

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Summary: The post-synodal exhortation *Amoris laetitia* of Pope Francis provoked the most heated theological dispute since the Second Vatican Council. They also awakened new hopes and expectations of the faithful, especially those living in non-sacramental relationships. Because of objective spiritual obstacles, they cannot receive absolution and receive Holy Communion. Now, because of these aroused hopes, they turn again to priests, especially to confessors. It is a great challenge for them to meet all those who need help and accompaniment on their way back to full integration with the community of the Church. An important impulse for reflection on this challenge is *Pastoral Guidelines for Exhortation Amoris laetitia* adopted by the Polish Episcopal Conference at its 379th plenary meeting on 8 June 2018. This document was long awaited by the priests. He have provided answers to some questions concerning the pastoral practice of the Church, in particular concerning the giving of Holy Communion to people living in non-sacramental relationships. Bishops reminded the already existing indications, which have not changed. On the other hand, they placed a strong emphasis on a renewed evangelical attitude towards people in an irregular situation. They emphasized that the pastoral ministry should be characterize “with closeness, respect and compassion, which at the same time heal, liberate and encourage adolescence in the Christian life”. With regard to this pastoral goal, the author of the article will focus on the role and selected tasks of the priest. This will be a welcoming reception, accompaniment in the discernment of situations and a gradual integration with the community of the Church.

Keywords: *Amoris laetitia*, Pastoral Guidelines, accompanying, discernment, integration

Poszukiwanie i towarzyszenie w drodze powrotnej.  
Uwagi na marginesie *Wytucznych pastoralnych*  
*do adhortacji Amoris laetitia*  
Konferencji Episkopatu Polski

Streszczenie: Posynodalna adhortacja *Amoris laetitia* papieża Franciszka sprowokowała najbardziej gorący spór teologiczny od czasu Soboru Watykańskiego

II. Rozbudziła także nowe nadzieje i oczekiwania wiernych, zwłaszcza żyjących w związkach niesakramentalnych. Z powodu obiektywnych przeszkód natury duchowej nie mogą oni otrzymać rozgrzeszenia i przystępować do Komunii świętej. Teraz – ze względu na owe rozbudzone nadzieje – na nowo zwracają się do duszpasterzy, w szczególności do spowiedników. Jest to dla nich wielkie wyzwanie, by wyjść na spotkanie tym, którzy potrzebują pomocy i towarzyszenia w drodze powrotu do pełnej integracji ze wspólnotą Kościoła. Ważnym impulsem do refleksji na tym wyzwaniem są *Wytyczne pastoralne do adhortacji Amoris laetitia* przyjęte przez Konferencję Episkopatu Polski na 379. zebraniu plenarnym w dniu 8 czerwca 2018 r. Dokument ten był długo oczekiwany przez duszpasterzy. Przyniósł on odpowiedź na niektóre pytania dotyczące duszpasterskiej praktyki Kościoła, w szczególności dotyczące udzielania Komunii świętej osobom żyjącym w związkach niesakramentalnych. Biskupi przypomnieli istniejące już wskazania, które nie uległy zmianie. Natomiast mocny akcent położyli na odnowioną, ewangeliczną postawę wobec osób, które znalazły się w sytuacji nieregularnej. Podkreślili, by pasterską posługę „naznaczyć bliskością, spojrzeniem pełnym szacunku i współczucia, które jednocześnie leczą, wyzwalają i zachęcają do dojrzewania w życiu chrześcijańskim”. W odniesieniu do tego pastoralnego celu autor artykułu skupi się na roli i wybranych zadaniach kapłana. Będą to życzliwe przyjęcie, towarzyszenie w rozeznawaniu sytuacji oraz stopniowa integracja ze wspólnotą Kościoła.

Słowa kluczowe: *Amoris laetitia*, wytyczne pastoralne, towarzyszenie, rozeznanie, integracja

## Introduction

The two General Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops dedicated to the family (5-19.10.2014 and 4-25.10.2015) and the post-synodal exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (published on 8.04.2016) provoked numerous questions and doubts of theological nature, and consequently the most heated theological dispute since the Second Vatican Council<sup>1</sup>. They also awakened new hopes and expectations of the faithful, especially those living in non-sacramental relationships. Because of objective spiritual obstacles, they cannot receive absolution and receive Holy Communion. Now, because of these aroused hopes, they turn again to pastors, especially to confessors. This is a good fruit of both the synodal path and the reading of the papal exhortation. The Holy Spirit used them to involve the faithful again in the life of the Church, who may have felt rejected or pushed away. The great gift to the Church community is the fact that those who were like lost sheep (cf. Matt 18:12-14; Luke 15:1-7), often

<sup>1</sup> The nature and importance of the dispute is discussed in J. Kupczak, *Źródła sporu o Amoris laetitia*, Poznań 2018. Among the Polish publications presenting the fruits of the theological debate on the exhortation *Amoris laetitia* it is worth mentioning, among others: I. Mroczkowski, *Etos miłosierdzia a wierność małżeńska. Moralne dylematy osób żyjących w związkach niesakramentalnych*, Płock 2017; *Towarzyszyć małżeństwu i rodzinie. Inspiracje adhortacji apostolskiej Amoris laetitia dla duszpasterstwa*, red. J. Goleń, Lublin 2017; *Miłość jest nam dana i zadana. Komentarz do posynodalnej adhortacji apostolskiej „Amoris laetitia” papieża Franciszka*, red. G. Chojnacki, Szczecin 2017, as well as „Teologia i Moralność” nr 23 (2018), „Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne Śląska Opolskiego” 37/1 (2017); „Społeczeństwo” 27/4 (2017), „Sosnowieckie Studia Teologiczne” 13 (2016-2017).

without a shepherd (Matt 9:36; Mark 6:34), are now beginning to return to Christ's fold, guided by the grace of the Spirit of God, who acts as he wishes (cf. John 3:8) and gives new hope (cf. Rom 5:5). At the same time, it is a great challenge to go out to meet all those who need help and accompaniment on the way back (cf. Luke 15:4-5; John 10:16).

An important impulse for reflection on this challenge is *Pastoral Guidelines for Exhortation Amoris laetitia* adopted by the Polish Episcopal Conference at its 379th plenary meeting on 8 June 2018<sup>2</sup>. This document was long awaited by the priests, whose task, as indicated by Pope Francis, "accompany [the divorced and remarried] in helping them to understand their situation according to the teaching of the Church and the guidelines of the bishop"<sup>3</sup>. *Pastoral guidelines* were formulated by reading *Amoris laetitia* in the spirit of "hermeneutics of continuity". They are an expression of the conviction that the exhortation "only takes into account, but above all complements and updates the previous statements of the Magisterium of the Church on marriage and family"<sup>4</sup>. They contain numerous references to the exhortation interpreted in the light of other important documents of Pope Francis, in particular the programmatic exhortation of the *Evangelii gaudium*, but also the most recent exhortation *Gaudete et exultate*. They also emphasize the need to develop a new Directory for the Pastoral Care of Families for the Church in Poland in order to "characterize the pastoral ministry with closeness, a respectful and compassionate look that simultaneously heals, liberates, and encourages growth in Christian life"<sup>5</sup>. With regard to this pastoral goal, this reflection will focus on the role and selected tasks of the priest. This will be a welcoming reception, accompaniment in the discernment of situations and a gradual integration with the community of the Church.

## 1. Friendly welcome

To offer God's mercy through the ministry of the Church requires the fulfilment of a fundamental condition. It is a kind and unconditional reception and a willingness to accompany all those who wish to return to full communion with the Church. This applies to the faithful in an irregular situation, in particular to divorced spouses who live in repeat relationships. Fulfilling this condition is, of course, only the beginning of the road and only the creation of a suitable space in which it will be possible to recognize the truth about the concrete situation of the faithful and find a way to help them. Hence, so much depends on the reaction and attitude of the priest, a confessor who is often like a general practitioner. He cannot simply send the patient home without examining the patient. Each case of a similar treatment of the faithful, so that

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<sup>2</sup> Polish Episcopal Conference, *Pastoral Guidelines for Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*. Original text: *Wytuczne pastoralne do adhortacji Amoris laetitia* (8.06.2018), <https://episkopat.pl/biskupi-potrzeba-sluzby-malzenstwu-i-rodzynie-oraz-osobom-w-zwiazkach-niesakramentalnych/> [10.06.2018].

<sup>3</sup> Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, n. 300.

<sup>4</sup> *Pastoral Guidelines for Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, n. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Pastoral Guidelines for Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, Conclusion.

they felt rejected and even condemned by the Church, first calls for the conversion of the pastors themselves. Polish bishops emphasized this in the introduction to the *Pastoral Guidelines*: “In the voice of Pope Francis we recognize the fatherly call to «pastoral and missionary conversion» (*Evangelii gaudium*, n. 25). This appeal for a pastoral phrase stems from his concern for every human being (cf. *Misericordiae vultus*, n. 4), in which he clearly refers to St. John Paul II, for whom «man is the first way on which the Church must walk in fulfilling her mission» (*Redemptor hominis*, n. 14)”. At the same time they pointed out that the realization of this task requires “deeper reflection and tender and merciful care of the pastors”<sup>6</sup>.

In this spirit, it is worth recalling a few indications of contemporary popes addressed to priests, in particular to confessors. Their task is to reveal the tenderness and mercy of God<sup>7</sup>. Their attitude will determine to a large extent whether the faithful living in non-sacramental relationships will feel welcomed anew by the community of the Church and wish to accompany them through discernment and gradual integration. It is about making the meeting in the confessional – sometimes first after many years – a new beginning of discovering that the path to full reconciliation has not been definitively closed to them<sup>8</sup>. This path should be illuminated above all by the Word of God as a starting point and a basis for further pastoral dialogue. Therefore, the confessor’s task is to communicate the truth about God’s mercy - love more powerful than sin, patiently reminding us that Jesus Christ revealed the true face of the merciful God (cf. John 14:9). „When we realize that God’s love for us does not cease in the face of our sin or recoil before our offenses, but becomes even more attentive and generous; when we realize that this love went so far as cause the passion and death of the Word made flesh who consented to redeem us at the price of his own blood, then we exclaim in gratitude: «Yes, the Lord is rich in mercy» and even: «The Lord is mercy»”<sup>9</sup>.

Among the texts worth returning to, trusting in their invigorating power and con-

<sup>6</sup> *Pastoral Guidelines for Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, Introduction.

<sup>7</sup> I signalled this issue in the context of the Pope’s concern for the quality of service in the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Cf. Z. Wanat, *Troska Benedykta XVI o kapłanów jako szafarzy sakramentu miłosierdzia*, „*Studia Theologica Varsaviensia*” 54/2 (2016), s. 31-57; *Spowiednik jako uczestnik rewolucji czułości. Na marginesie encykliki Evangelii Gaudium Papieża Franciszka*, „*Studia Gdańskie*” 38 (2016), s. 227-238; *Kapłan – sługa Bożego miłosierdzia*, „*Studia Theologica Varsaviensia*” 52/2 (2014), s. 83-102; *Kapłan-spowiednik – sługa miłości potężniejszej niż grzech*, „*Teologia i Człowiek*” nr 7-8 (2006), s. 271-288.

<sup>8</sup> In the document *Serving the truth about marriage and family* (Łomża, 19.06.2009), the Polish bishops clearly pointed out the quality of service in the sacrament of penance. “There must always be so many confessors to be able to administer this sacrament in a hurry. It is not enough to give absolution in a hurry. It is necessary to have time for each penitent to take up subjects related to the confession of sins and to answer any questions. The truth about marriage and family must be served gently but decisively. The Sacrament of Reconciliation held in a hurry and superficially discourages its use” (n. 90). The time spent on the penitent is always a very important factor in the fruitful use of the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. In the case of the faithful who somehow return from afar, it may even have a decisive meaning.

<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliation and Penance*, n. 22.

stant effectiveness (cf. Heb 4:12) is the Gospel parable of the prodigal son (cf. Luke 15:15-32). St. John Paul reflected on it many times, among others in the encyclical *Dives in misericordia* (n. 5-6) and the Exhortation *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* (n. 5-6). He was convinced that this parable in a special way raises the spirit, awakens hope and enables returns<sup>10</sup>. That is why it should also be reminded to people living in non-sacramental relationships. It ensures that a man who commits sin does not lose his filial dignity to God, for his love surpasses justice. “the relationship between justice and love, that is manifested as mercy, is inscribed with great exactness in the content of the Gospel parable. It becomes more evident that love is transformed into mercy when it is necessary to go beyond the precise norm of justice-precise and often too narrow”<sup>11</sup>. The Gospel parable shows the true face of God as the merciful Father. His faithful love is expressed in his readiness to welcome all those who return immediately and joyfully, and in generously giving them when they return home. This is accompanied by a deep emotion on the part of the father, which is based on the awareness that “a fundamental good has been saved: the good of his son’s humanity. Although the son has squandered the inheritance, nevertheless his humanity is saved. [...] The father’s fidelity to himself is totally concentrated upon the humanity of the lost son, upon his dignity. This explains above all his joyous emotion at the moment of the son’s return home”<sup>12</sup>.

A common reflection on the content of the parable leads to the discovery of just such a love of God for every human being, especially for the sinner. It is the way to a humble and confident acceptance of the truth about human moral condition. The knowledge that God loves unconditionally, in spite of man’s sinfulness, ensures that the truth about sin and its painful consequences does not lead to discouragement or despair. For God’s mercy leans over every prodigal son, over his moral misery and sin. Anyone who experiences mercy in this way does not feel humiliated, but found again. He experiences the joy of his father who found him<sup>13</sup>. Then the person who returns is also able to accept the teaching of the Church and the communal road that He proposes.

Pope Benedict XVI also emphasized the need to show the truth about God’s mercy, which liberates hope and gives strength for authentic conversion. He also pointed out that this liberating truth is confirmed by the attitude of the priest himself, a kind reception and patient hearing of the penitent. In this way, the priest represents and imitates Christ, who proclaimed the good news of forgiveness not only in words, but also through concrete gestures of human goodness and tenderness towards sinners<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. John Paul II, General Audience *Pokuta w Kościele – wspólnocie kapłańskiej i sakramentalnej* (Watykan, 15.04.1992), „L’Osservatore Romano” 13/6 (1992), s. 40.

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical *Dives in misericordia*, n. 5.

<sup>12</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical *Dives in misericordia*, n. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical *Dives in misericordia*, n. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI to the Confessors who serve in the four Papal Basilicas of Rome* (19.02.2007), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/february/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20070219\\_penitenzieri.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070219_penitenzieri.html) [15.08.2018].

„By experiencing the tenderness and pardon of the Lord, the penitent is more easily led to acknowledge the gravity of sin, is more resolved to avoid it in order to remain and grow in renewed friendship with God”<sup>15</sup>. That is why the Pope encouraged the priest to “to make transpire, in words and in drawing near to the penitent, the merciful love of God. Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, to welcome the penitent sinner, to help him rise again from sin, to encourage him to amend himself, never making pacts with evil but always taking up again the way of evangelical perfection. May this beautiful experience of the prodigal son, who finds the fullness of divine mercy in the father, be the experience of whoever confesses in the Sacrament of Reconciliation”<sup>16</sup>.

Revelation of the tenderness and forgiving love of God is truly fruitful when the priest first experiences it personally. “His knowledge of his own limitations and his need to have recourse to Divine Mercy to ask forgiveness, to convert his heart and to be sustained on the journey to holiness are fundamental in the life of a priest. Only those who have first experienced its greatness can be convinced preachers and administrators of God’s mercy”<sup>17</sup>. At the same time, humility and trust are needed in the face of very complicated situations and existential dramas of penitents. It is difficult to find easy hints or explanations. Therefore, the priest should remember that in the end he embraces everything and accepts God’s Love, which forgives and transforms: “though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isa 1:18). “If, on the one hand knowing and, in a certain way, visiting the depths of the human heart, even its darkest aspects, tests the humanity and the faith of the priest himself, on the other, it fosters within him the certainty that it is God who has the last word over human evil and history, it is his Mercy which can make all things new (cf. Rev 21:5)”<sup>18</sup>.

Similar remarks can easily be found in the teachings of Pope Francis. He calls on confessors to participate in the “revolution of tenderness”. This means following the way in which the merciful God turns to the needy, the weak and sinful man. This way embodies Jesus Christ. As a Good Shepherd, he becomes a point of reference for a confessor’s attitude and mode of action towards the penitent. Look at and consider the example of Jesus, who has the heart of God. “He is full of tenderness for the people, especially for those who are excluded, that is, for sinners, for the sick who

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants in the Course on the Internal Forum promoted by the Apostolic Penitentiary* (Vatican, 16.03.2007), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/march/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20070316\\_apost-penitentiary.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070316_apost-penitentiary.html) [16.08.2018].

<sup>17</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants in the Course on the Internal Forum promoted by the Apostolic Penitentiary* (Vatican, 11.03.2010), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/march/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20100311\\_penitenzieria.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100311_penitenzieria.html) [16.08.2018].

<sup>18</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants in the Course on the Internal Forum promoted by the Apostolic Penitentiary* (Vatican, 25.03.2011), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/march/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20110325\\_penitenzieria.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110325_penitenzieria.html) [16.08.2018].

no one takes care of.... Thus, in the image of the Good Shepherd, the priest is a man of mercy and compassion, close to his people and a servant to all. This is a pastoral criterion I would like to emphasize strongly: closeness. Closeness and service, but closeness, nearness!...”<sup>19</sup>.

Pope Francis also recalls an important practical guide to the manifestation of God’s mercy and tenderness. It concerns the discernment and evaluation of the situation of the faithful, as well as the judgement of a specific procedure. „Neither the laxist nor the rigorist bears witness to Jesus Christ, for neither the one nor the other takes care of the person he encounters. The rigorist washes his hands of them: in fact, he nails the person to the law, understood in a cold and rigid way; and the laxist also washes his hands of them: he is only apparently merciful, but in reality he does not take seriously the problems of that conscience, by minimizing the sin. True mercy *takes the person into one’s care*, listens to him attentively, approaches the situation with respect and truth, and accompanies him on the journey of reconciliation. And this is demanding, yes, certainly. The truly merciful priest behaves like the Good Samaritan... but why does he do it? Because his heart is capable of having compassion, it is the heart of Christ!”<sup>20</sup>.

It should be emphasized that such an attitude is first a grace and a gift of the Holy Spirit, and only then a task. For this reason, Francis called on priests to receive grace with confidence (cf. John 20:22-23) and to take up the task courageously, becoming “men of the Holy Spirit” – joyful, strong witnesses and heralds of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. “This witness is seen on the face, is heard in the voice of the priest who administers the Sacrament of Reconciliation with faith and «anointing». He receives penitents not with the attitude of a judge, nor with that of a simple friend, but with the charity of God, with the love of a father who sees his son returning and goes out to meet him, of the shepherd who has found his lost sheep. The heart of a priest is a heart capable of being moved by compassion, not through sentimentalism or mere emotion, but through the «bowels of mercy» of the Lord”<sup>21</sup>.

Genuine compassion does not allow us to forget that the faithful often have great difficulty in confessing their sins before another person. For this reason, in addition to the positive indications in the teaching of Francis, the call, which was very strong in the exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, returns: “I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord’s mercy which spurs us on to do our best”<sup>22</sup>. It is also found literally quoted in a foot-

<sup>19</sup> Francis, *Address of Pope Francis to the Parish Priests of the Diocese of Rome* (Vatican, 6.03.2014), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/march/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140306\\_clero-diocesi-roma.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/march/documents/papa-francesco_20140306_clero-diocesi-roma.html) [30.08.2018].

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Francis, *Address of Pope Francis to Participants in a Course sponsored by the Apostolic Penitentiary* (Vatican, 28.03.2014), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/march/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140328\\_corso-penitenzieria-apostolica.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/march/documents/papa-francesco_20140328_corso-penitenzieria-apostolica.html) [31.08.2018].

<sup>22</sup> Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii gaudium*, n. 44.

note to one of the exhortation points of *Amoris laetitia*<sup>23</sup>. In a similar way, the Pope appealed during his meeting with confessors to help the faithful to experience peace and human and Christian understanding. “Confession should not be «torture», but everyone should leave the confessional with happiness in their hearts, with their faces radiating hope, albeit at times – we know – bathed in the tears of conversion and joy derived from it’s The Sacrament, with all of the penitent’s actions, does not mean it should become a harsh, annoying and intrusive interrogation. On the contrary, it should be a liberating encounter, enriched with humanity, through which one can educate in mercy”<sup>24</sup>. The willingness to welcome and accompany the faithful in this way, especially those who are in difficulty, is a necessary condition and only the beginning of a long process of pastoral discernment.

## 2. Accompanying in discernment

*Pastoral guidelines* emphasize the need for pastoral accompaniment of the faithful. His evangelical image is behaviour of Jesus towards the disciples who are on their way to Emmaus (cf. Luke 24:13-35). The Accompanying demands to get closer to the other and to walk together with him. The bishops recall the teachings of Pope Francis, who encourages, without diminishing the value of the evangelical ideal, to accompany with mercy and patience the possible stages of growth of the people forming day by day. In this way we should make room for the Lord’s mercy, which encourages us to do the possible good. The fruit of this ministry of the faithful is the development of the pastoral care of ties. In this way, the whole community of the faithful is ready to accompany man in all his experiences, including those that are painful and often prolonged<sup>25</sup>.

According to the wish of Pope Francis, Polish bishops remind us that pastoral accompaniment should include fiancées, spouses and people who found themselves in difficult and irregular situations<sup>26</sup>. Its purpose is discernment, which is part of the Church’s mission and is understood first as a pastoral, evangelical and spiritual study of the ways of life before God<sup>27</sup>. They note that the term “discernment” – used in *Amoris laetitia* Exhortation about 50 times – is crucial for understanding its message. Recalling the words of the latest exhortation of Francis *Gaudete et Exsultate*, they show that this discernment covers different aspects of Christian life seen from the perspective of God’s vocation and the ultimate goal of human life. It does not exclu-

<sup>23</sup> Footnote 351 to number 305 of the exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*.

<sup>24</sup> Francis, *Address of his Holiness Francis to Participants in a Course on the Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary* (Vatican, 12.03.2015), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/march/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150312\\_tribunale-penitenzieria-apostolica.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/march/documents/papa-francesco_20150312_tribunale-penitenzieria-apostolica.html) [31.08.2018].

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Pastoral Guidelines for Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, n. 2; Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, nr 24, 44; Francis, Post-synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 308.

<sup>26</sup> Pope Francis dedicates an entire chapter VI of his exhortation *Amoris laetitia* to this issue, n. 205-258.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 33, 50, 154.



de “spiritual discernment does not exclude existential, psychological, sociological or moral insights drawn from the human sciences. At the same time, it transcends them. Nor are the Church’s sound norms sufficient. [...] discernment is a grace. Even though it includes reason and prudence, it goes beyond them, for it seeks a glimpse of that unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us, which takes shape amid so many varied situations and limitations. It involves more than my temporal well-being, my satisfaction at having accomplished something useful, or even my desire for peace of mind. It has to do with the meaning of my life before the Father”<sup>28</sup>. In this way, they encourage personal reflection on a slightly larger part of this exhortation devoted to the theme of discernment<sup>29</sup>.

Polish bishops explain that discernment presupposes humility, generosity and patience and indicates its meaning and purpose. “It is a means of spiritual combat for helping us to follow the Lord more faithfully. We need it at all times, to help us recognize God’s timetable, lest we fail to heed the promptings of his grace and disregard his invitation to grow”<sup>30</sup>. It is intended to guide all the faithful who ask for it, to become aware of their situation before God, to help them find possible ways of responding to God and in their development in the midst of limitations<sup>31</sup>. They also say that the law of gradual approach, which John Paul II pointed out in his exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, is very helpful in the realization of the difficult work of accompaniment and discernment. This law presupposes that man “knows, loves and does moral good, according to the stages of his development”<sup>32</sup>. Bishops also point out that Pope Francis recommends that attenuating circumstances be taken into account in pastoral discernment. To this end, he recalls the conditions contained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which reduce, and sometimes even abolish, the accountability and responsibility of the perpetrator and the circumstances which reduce moral responsibility<sup>33</sup>. Their inclusion will be important in the process of fuller inclusion in the life of the community of the Church.

The explicit reference to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* requires that the importance of attenuating circumstances be read in the light of the entire article on the morality of human acts<sup>34</sup>. According to the traditional view of the moral evaluation of human activity, which is recalled there, it depends on three elements:

<sup>28</sup> Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, n. 170.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, n. 166-175.

<sup>30</sup> Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, n. 169.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Pastoral Guidelines for Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, n. 2; Francis, Post-synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 300, 303, 305.

<sup>32</sup> John Paul II, Post-synodal Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, n. 34, cf. Francis, Post-synodal Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, n. 295.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Francis, Post-synodal Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, n. 302; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1753; 2352.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1749-1761. An in-depth reflection on this subject is contained in Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, n. 71-83; cf. Por. M. Marian, *Znaczenie okoliczności łagodzących w adhortacji papieża Franciszka Amoris laetitia. Wielość interpretacji*, „Studia Nauk Teologicznych PAN” 12 (2017), s. 265-283.

the chosen object, the intended purpose, i.e. the intention and circumstances of the action. An objective element, i.e. the subject of conscious and voluntary action, is of fundamental importance for moral evaluation. On the side of the operating entity there is its intention, the first component of which is the purpose of the action. However, “the circumstances, including the consequences, are secondary elements of a moral act. They contribute to increasing or diminishing the moral goodness or evil of human acts (for example, the amount of a theft). They can also diminish or increase the agent’s responsibility (such as acting out of a fear of death). Circumstances of themselves cannot change the moral quality of acts themselves; they can make neither good nor right an action that is in itself evil”<sup>35</sup>. The Catechism clearly states that a morally good deed presupposes both the good of the object, the purpose and the circumstances<sup>36</sup>. Therefore, for a moral assessment it is not enough to take into account only the intention or circumstances. In addition, “there are acts which, in and of themselves, independently of circumstances and intentions, are always gravely illicit by reason of their object; such as blasphemy and perjury, murder and adultery”<sup>37</sup>.

The last of these acts appears in the exhortation *Amoris laetitia* only in reference to the history of the adulteress in the Gospel of John (cf. John 8:1-11), which Jesus does not condemn, but calls for conversion, or a more dignified life<sup>38</sup>. This scene is of particular importance for discerning irregular situations, including the situation of the faithful living in non-sacramental relationships. It shows that one can show understanding and mercy without blurring the truth about sin, of which Jesus speaks clearly (cf. Matt 19:1-9). That is why Francis states: “Given that gradualness is not in the law itself (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 34), this discernment can never disregard the demands of the evangelical truth and charity, as proposed by the Church”<sup>39</sup>. They must be carried out in such a way that “lest anyone think that the demands of the Gospel are in any way being compromised”<sup>40</sup>. This applies both to the call to conversion and to showing affection and mercy to the returnee.

With regard to people who have divorced and entered into a new civil partnership, the Polish bishops point out that there is an innumerable diversity of situations. For the sake of their spiritual well-being, it is necessary to discern their specific, individual situation. They stress that “this discernment should first lead to an ecclesiastical trial to determine whether the first marriage can be declared null and void”<sup>41</sup>. This is a very important indication, because it protects the faithful from subjectivity of judgments in such an extremely important matter. After all, it is about their dignified sacramental communion with Christ and His Church and the possibility of getting

<sup>35</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1754.

<sup>36</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1755.

<sup>37</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1756.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Francis, Post-synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 27, 38, 64.

<sup>39</sup> Francis, Post-synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 300.

<sup>40</sup> Francis, Post-synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 301.

<sup>41</sup> *Pastoral Guidelines for Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, n. 4.

married to a person with whom they have a non-sacramental relationship.

It is worth recalling the explanations of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, why it is not enough only to judge the individual's conscience about the existence or non-existence of a previous marriage and the validity of a new marriage. "Marriage, in fact, because it is both the image of the spousal relationship between Christ and his Church as well as the fundamental core and an important factor in the life of civil society, is essentially a public reality. [...] the consent that is the foundation of marriage is not simply a private decision since it creates a specifically ecclesial and social situation for the spouses, both individually and as a couple. Thus the judgment of conscience of one's own marital situation does not regard only the immediate relationship between man and God, as if one could prescind from the Church's mediation, that also includes canonical laws binding in conscience. Not to recognise this essential aspect would mean in fact to deny that marriage is a reality of the Church, that is to say, a sacrament"<sup>42</sup>. Therefore, when speaking of a discernment of the situation, the Church first points to the canonical process, the sole purpose of which is to affirm the truth in an unbiased manner. The Church does not want to replace human consciences, but wants to serve them in searching for and reaching the truth<sup>43</sup>. It is only on its foundation that it is possible to integrate more fully into the life of the ecclesial community and to find the way to the Holy Communion.

### 3. Gradual integration

Polish bishops point out that the aim of pastoral discernment and accompaniment of every person – regardless of their life situation – is to integrate with themselves and with the community of the Church. It is based on the logic of integration into the community, thanks to which the faithful not only discover belonging to the Church, but also experience it joyfully and fruitfully<sup>44</sup>. In addition to human gestures that confirm that the community of the Church really wants to be close to those experiencing spiritual difficulties and crises, to married couples and families who are struggling with an ever-increasing crisis of faith and love, a clear message of faith concerning the nature of the Church is necessary. It is made up of all the baptized, including those who live in an irregular situation, e. g. in a non-sacramental relationship. Some of them, because of their personal negative experiences, need new confirmation that they are part of the Church and have never been excluded from it. What

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<sup>42</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church concerning the Reception of Holy Communion by the divorced and remarried Members of the Faithful* (Rom, 14.09.1994), n. 7-8.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, n. 64; M. Szczodry, *Kwestia sumienia w posynodalnej adhortacji Amoris Laetitia papieża Franciszka*, w: *Miłość jest nam dana i zadana. Komentarz do posynodalnej adhortacji apostolskiej „Amoris laetitia” papieża Franciszka*, red. G. Chojnacki, Szczecin 2017, s. 243-260.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Pastoral *Guidelines for Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, n. 2; Francis, Post-synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 299; M. Machinek, *Logika inkluzji papieża Franciszka. Pytania otwarte na marginesie adhortacji Amoris laetitia*, „Forum Teologiczne” 18 (2017), s. 197-211.

is more, they are called to find their unique and irreplaceable place in this community and to build it as far as possible in the realization of their own vocation. The task of the community, on the other hand, is to help them to better understand their personal situation and to properly discover the path of personal maturity<sup>45</sup>.

The way Jesus pointed out is a way of mercy and integration, a communal way of spiritual development. First of all, it is about the growth of love, which is the best counterbalance to evil<sup>46</sup>. The presence of this love is confirmed by the concrete attitudes and actions that can also be taken by the faithful living in irregular situations. These are the concerns for the sustainability of the new relationship and the upbringing of children, as well as the commitment to Christian life. John Paul II called both the shepherds and the whole community of 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 favour 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”<sup>47</sup>.

Spiritual maturity is necessary to achieve full integration with the community of the Church, whose sign is Holy Communion. It should be remembered that Pope Francis did not change the discipline concerning the conditions of Holy Communion for divorced faithful who live in a non-sacramental relationship<sup>48</sup>. He encouraged them to discern their situation in order to help them find possible ways of responding to God and developing among the limitations. They too can grow in the life of grace and love, receiving the help of the Church for this purpose<sup>49</sup>. Only in a footnote to this incentive it adds: “In certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments. [...] the Eucharist «is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak»”<sup>50</sup>. Some participants in the discussion exaggeratedly emphasize the importance of this beautiful statement. It should be noted, however, that it is neither new nor even more revolutionary. The Church is made up of people who are aware of their sinfulness and who profess this truth at every Holy Mass: *Domine, non sum dignus, ut intres sub tectum meum, sed tantum dic verbo, et sanabitur anima*

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Pastoral Guidelines for Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, n. 3; Francis, Post-synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 312.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *Pastoral Guidelines for Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, n. 2; Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exultate*, n. 141, 163; Francis, Post-synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 296.

<sup>47</sup> John Paul II, Post-synodal Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, n. 84.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Francis, Post-synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 300; W. Góralski, *Adhortacja apostolska Amoris Laetitia papieża Franciszka. Prezentacja dokumentu z komentarzem do nn. 300-308*, Płock 2016, s. 49-55.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Francis, Post-synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 305.

<sup>50</sup> Footnote 351 to number 305 of the exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*.

mea – “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed”<sup>51</sup>.

The words spoken just before receiving Holy Communion express the faith of the Church, which, in the face of the greatness of the sacrament of the Eucharist, humbly repeats the words of the centurion (cf. Matt 8:8). He recognizes his own weakness and at the same time confesses the omnipotence of Christ. He can offer his help, exceeding any limitations that are on the human side. Therefore, the Lord Jesus did not have to come personally to the centurion’s house in order to successfully heal his servant (cf. Matt 8:5-13). The same is true of receiving Him in Holy Communion. Believers who are not ready for it and suitably disposed to do so may otherwise receive the necessary graces. It is true that they come from the sacraments that accompany the different stages and ways of Christian life, but to the merciful God “is not bound by his sacraments”<sup>52</sup>. God can haunt his believers and help them as He wants, not only through these visible signs<sup>53</sup>.

Therefore, in patient accompaniment of the faithful who have entered into a new relationship, they must be shown the deepest motives for which they cannot receive Holy Communion. A church faithful to the teachings of Jesus cannot recognize the validity of a new relationship if the previous marriage was validly celebrated (cf. Mark 10:11-12). The divorced who have entered into a civil union are in a situation that is objectively contrary to God’s law. As long as this situation continues, they cannot receive Holy Communion. It must be made clear to them that “This norm is not at all a punishment or a discrimination against the divorced and remarried, but rather expresses an objective situation that of itself renders impossible the reception of Holy Communion: «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 his 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»”<sup>54</sup>.

Authentic understanding and true mercy are never detached from the truth. The-

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<sup>51</sup> *The Order of Mass*, The Communion Rite; cf. I. Mroczkowski, *Etos miłosierdzia a dylematy sumienia osób żyjących w związkach niesakramentalnych*, „Studia Teologiczno-Historyczne Śląska Opolskiego” 37/1 (2017), s. 105-120.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1257.

<sup>53</sup> On the subject of spiritual communion of persons in non-sacramental relationships, cf. I. Mroczkowski, *Etos miłosierdzia a wierność małżeńska. Moralne dylematy osób żyjących w związkach niesakramentalnych*, Płock 2017, s. 85-90.

<sup>54</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church concerning the Reception of Holy Communion by the divorced and remarried Members of the Faithful* (Rom, 14.09.1994), n. 4; John Paul II, Post-synodal Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, n. 84. These indications were clearly confirmed by the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, Declaration Concerning the Admission to Holy Communion of Faithful who are Divorced and Remarried (Vatican, 24.06.2000), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/intrptxt/documents/rc\\_pc\\_intrptxt\\_doc\\_20000706\\_declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/intrptxt/documents/rc_pc_intrptxt_doc_20000706_declaration_en.html) [31.08.2018]; cf. W. Góralski, *Sprawiedliwość czy miłosierdzie? Problem Komunii*

refore, the faithful in such a situation, who are eager to participate fully in the sacrament of the Eucharist, must be clearly reminded that the only way to communion is sacramental absolution. It 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, for example, for 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». In such a case they may receive Holy Communion as long as they respect the obligation to avoid giving scandal”<sup>55</sup>. The possibility of making such a decision is indicated by the *Pastoral Guidelines* as the fruit of a long-term process of accompaniment and pastoral discernment<sup>56</sup>. Although such a proposal may seem very difficult and not for everyone, it is an expression of the pastoral approach of the Church, which shows divine pedagogy of grace and helps “to reach the fullness of God’s plan, something which is always possible by the power of the Holy Spirit”<sup>57</sup>.

## Conclusion

The long-awaited *Pastoral Guidelines* have provided answers to some questions concerning the pastoral practice of the Church, in particular concerning the giving of Holy Communion to people living in non-sacramental relationships. They reminded the already existing indications, which have not changed. On the other hand, they placed a strong emphasis on a renewed evangelical attitude towards people in an irregular situation. The indications contained in the *Pastoral Guidelines* do not at all close the important and necessary theological discussion around the exhortation *Amoris laetitia*. They rather encourage it to have a practical and pastoral character as well. One of the issues that they want to be valued is undoubtedly to help people who are in a particularly difficult situation. These are people who have been abandoned or have left their spouse, but are now trying to return to their sacramental spouse. Because they remain in love, fidelity and prayer – appealing to the grace of the sacrament, they deserve the loving gaze and support of the Church<sup>58</sup>.

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*Świętej katolików rozwiedzionych i żyjących w małżeństwie cywilnym*, Płock 2016, s. 49-54.

<sup>55</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church concerning the Reception of Holy Communion by the divorced and remarried Members of the Faithful* (Rom, 14.09.1994), n. 4; cf. John Paul II, Post-synodal Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, n. 84.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. *Pastoral Guidelines for Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, n. 3, 4.

<sup>57</sup> Francis, Post-synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 297.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *Pastoral Guidelines for Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, n. 3; Francis, Post-synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, n. 241-242.

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