

# FIRST THINGS

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## A STUBBORN GIVENNESS

by R. R. Reno

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**T**he Apostolic Exhortation on the Family, *Amoris Laetitia*, brings into the open a disturbing trend in this pontificate. Ironically, Pope Francis's pastoral vision seems to entail the same use-oriented individualism that he so forcefully criticizes in social and economic life.

Francis doesn't actually say that divorced and remarried Catholics can receive communion. *Amoris Laetitia* explicitly affirms the church's teaching on marriage. But in long digressions into the complexities of moral and pastoral discernment, Francis provides plenty of justifications for others to say that, yes, in particular situations, divorced and married Catholics can receive communion. All the while, Francis insists that the Catholic teaching on marriage must be affirmed. The ambiguity seems intentional, designed to increase scope for pastoral discretion.

The Catholic teaching on marriage is clear: It is permanent and cannot be dissolved. This is not a merely canonical matter, as though church officials at some point resolved to make indissolubility a feature of Catholic marriage. Christ warns us not to put asunder what God has put together. St. Paul associates the covenant of marriage with the unbreakable bond of God's love for us in Christ. Then, in a move characteristic of Catholicism, the Church teaches that in our wedding rites, the sacramental promise of permanence becomes real, just as Christ's promise to be with us until the end of the age becomes real in the transubstantiation of the bread and wine on the altar.

For these reasons, the Catholic Church has never held that civil divorce can end a marriage. Although church leaders speak of a divorced and remarried people, in the

Church's language, unless the first marriage is declared invalid through annulment, they are not "remarried." Their first marriage is still in effect, and they are living in an adulterous relationship they mistakenly imagine to be a "second marriage."

The sacramental discipline follows as a matter of course. St. Paul warned against profaning the body and blood of Christ, and so Catholicism, like many other Christian churches, "fences" the altar. The Church encourages proper preparation to receive communion, and in some circumstances prohibits reception.

It's not hard to see why this is the case for divorced and remarried people. They are not just violating one of the Ten Commandments. In their second marriage they've made a vow to do so. As a consequence, Catholicism has long held that a second marriage (without annulment or the death of the first spouse) is an objective impediment to full Eucharistic participation (unless the couple "lives as brother and sister," as tradition puts it).

By my reading, in key paragraphs in *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis argues that a second marriage need not be an objective impediment to the reception of communion. He does so by shifting the emphasis away from the objective to the subjective.

We see this in the emphasis Francis puts on conscience, discernment, and pastoral guidance. It's also evident in concerns that those in "irregular" situations not "feel as excommunicated members of the Church."

But the turn to the subject is clearest in his unacknowledged but very important shift to marriage as an "ideal." By this way of thinking, permanence becomes an ideal to be sought, not something intrinsic to marriage itself.

This shift allows Francis to speak of someone who, although divorced, remains committed to the ideal of marriage, including permanence, and who seeks the grace of God to realize this ideal in his or her second marriage.

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As he says of those who divorce, “It must remain clear that this is not the ideal which the Gospel proposes for marriage and the family.” Moreover, “In no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God’s plan in all its grandeur.”

These seem like decisive affirmations, but they’re not. The “objective situation” of divorce becomes secondary. An ideal does not reside in a state of affairs such as marital status, but rather in our intentions. So the driving question is subjective: Are we committed to the ideal of marriage?

Answering requires discernment. In a long section, Francis itemizes the questions that should guide the examination of conscience a divorced person should undertake. How were the children of the first marriage treated? Were attempts at reconciliation made? What of the abandoned spouse? What has the divorce meant for the community of faith and how has it harmed the institutions of marriage?

We have a tendency to deceive ourselves about our culpability and real commitments. So Francis requires that this examination be conducted in “conversation with the priest” so that “correct judgment” can be made about “what hinders full participation in the life of the Church and on what steps can foster it and make it grow.”

**W**hat Francis is saying, therefore, is that it’s not, perhaps, always the case that being divorced “hinders full participation.” What matters are the ideals that animate a person’s soul, not the “objective situation” of divorce. Does the person desire to realize the ideal of permanence in marriage this time around? If this desire is present, perhaps it’s possible for the priests to take “steps to foster it and make it grow.”

In a crucial footnote, Francis points out that fostering growth toward the “ideal” “can include the help of the sacraments.” To underscore the full meaning of this observation, he goes on to say that the Eucharist “is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful

medicine and nourishment for the weak.” Thus, although he never says divorced and remarried Catholics can receive communion, he provides priests and bishops with a way of thinking that allows them to conclude that, in certain circumstances, the divorce and remarried can enjoy “full participation.” Having translated the goods of marriage into an ideal, Francis is able to assert the ideal unequivocally, while muddying the specific question is whether any particular divorced and remarried person can receive communion.

I am not at all surprised by this. For twenty years I taught with Jesuits at Creighton University, many of whom I admired, even though I had reservations about their methods. Francis follows their pattern.

The first dimension is a persistent clericalism. On the matter of the divorced and remarried, Francis turns the pastor into the arbiter of who can and cannot receive communion—a decision based on a priest’s judgment of the interior spiritual condition of an individual Catholic. Francis sets aside the objective clarity of canon law, something that gives the lay Catholic a place to stand and leverage against limitless clerical discretion.

Moreover, the approach Francis outlines encourages a bourgeois outlook, as is often the case for the Society of Jesus. Why is it that some divorced and remarried Catholics can receive communion, but not others? The problem becomes all the greater because Francis has set up a process of discernment that is intensely subjective and private. The required conversation with the priest concerns questions of individual conscience. It’s a conversation no responsible priest would make public in order to justify his decision to allow a divorced and remarried person to receive communion.

Here is the response Francis gives: “When a responsible and tactful person, who does not presume to put his or her own desires ahead of the common good of the Church, meets with a pastor capable of acknowledging the seriousness of the matter before him,

there can be no risk that a specific discernment may lead people to think that the Church maintains a double standard.” In short, the “good people” with “good reputations” can be trusted. Allowing this mentality to take hold is the essence of bourgeois religion, which is precisely what clear canonical principles prevent. Law, unlike discernment, is no respecter of persons.

Most characteristic of the Jesuits is the way Francis instrumentalizes the sacramental life of the Church. It’s clear that he’s deeply pained by the possibility that an “objective situation” might impede a pastoral application of the full range of the Church’s sacramental system. Thus, in *Amoris Laetitia* the sacraments become tools to move a person toward the “ideal.”

This mentality has been characteristic of the Society of Jesus from the outset. St. Ignatius famously allowed that an individual Jesuit might, in certain circumstances, be released from the obligation to say the daily office. Discernment is required, of course, but if the daily regime of prayer stands in the way of the missionary goal, it can be suspended.

The same goes for the Jesuit emphasis on the intellectual life. It’s almost always an instrumental commitment, a way to evangelize, or to advance other goals. We see this in the fate of Thomism among Jesuits. They dropped it almost instantaneously after the Second Vatican Council—and this after having been known for their ardent Thomism. A religious order that can change horses so quickly isn’t one that encourages deep intellectual loyalty to any particular ideas. What matters more is their usefulness.

We need to make judicious judgments about what is essential and instrumental. The

Spiritual Exercises developed by St. Ignatius encourage a deep and profound interior clarification of Christ’s mission and our roles in it. This helps us discern what we must take up to better serve His ends—and what we must discard.

In the tortured material on “irregular” relationships, Francis demonstrates the Jesuit tendency to excess, however. He instrumentalizes the Church’s sacramental system. What gets in the way of realizing the “ideal,” must be made less rigid. What’s helpful—Eucharistic reception—must be made more available. It’s as if Christ instituted nothing permanent on earth, but only gave us a goal, sent us on mission.

The instrumentalization is ironic, for it mimics the technological mentality Francis criticizes so vigorously elsewhere. Francis Bacon was an early modern theorist of the scientific and technological conquest of nature for the “relief of man’s estate.” As *Laudato Si* points out, this may seem philanthropic, but it desacralizes nature and encourages a mentality of domination and control.

Francis seems to have the same view of the Church that Bacon had of nature. It’s raw material for pastoral virtuosos to deploy in order to move people closer to God. He’s impatient with the limitations imposed by “objective situations.” He speaks of a church “in permanent mission,” giving the impression that divine things are sacred only insofar as they’re useful in moving people toward missionary goals. In his ministry, everything must be available—in every situation. The sacred begins to merge with the useful.

*Amoris Laetitia* has many wise and beautiful things to say about marriage and family. Francis makes extensive use of *Humane Vitae*, and he strongly affirms the male-female difference. He clearly wants to resist the sexual revolution.

Yet, when it comes to a pastoral response to those of us wounded, damaged, and deformed by the sexual revolution, I fear Francis represents a spiritualized technological mentality. In this Apostolic Exhortation, when faced with the theological limitations to his vision of mercy-inspired evangelization, he employs the hyper-subjective logic of modernity. This will not end well, for it tempts us to imagine that we must master our Christian inheritance and re-engineer it into more useful, more missionary forms.

The Church's greatest gifts to the baptized are not to be found in her "ideals" or "values." The Church's sacraments make real what they signify; they do not symbolize values. Christ was God made man, not an ideal. We are blessed by the *fact* of Christ and his Church. We should cherish the Church's stubborn givenness, her substance—her permanence.

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