

# Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2016

## Submission to the Synod on the Family

Since September 2013 I have been participating with Catholic Church Reform International (CCRI), first as part of a group of advisors from various countries and more recently as a member of the group's "Strategy Team". In October 2014, with the blessing of the community, I went to Rome to participate in a "Forum on the Family" which met a few days in front of the Extraordinary Session of the Synod on the Family. In April of 2015 CCRI submitted a response to a call for comments to the *Relatio Synodi*, a series of questions to be considered by the Synod on the Family at its October 2015 session. The bulk of the submission was prepared from survey results compiled under the auspices of CCRI and the American Catholic Council in the months prior to the submission. A number of NOVA members met to discuss the survey, and thereafter filled out the survey using a Survey Monkey form. These survey results were reformatted to comport with format of the *Relatio Synodi*.

The first question in the *Relatio Synodi* was an open ended question, to which I wrote an eight page response that will be presented here in slightly edited form, broken into two parts.

### Part 1

God's grace is in the margins. While the norm of a family beginning with marriage of a man and a woman is articulated by the *Relatio Synodi*, and direction is given to encourage and support such families, this norm is made a basis for marginalizing a broader range of familial relationships. All of these relationships -- those within the norm and those outside it -- face the challenge of investing these relationships with love. The survey responses which are reflected in this submission are nearly unanimous in their recognition that grace can and does abound in familial relationships outside the stated norm, and that the Church's doctrinal marginalization of these relationships has been a disservice to the people of God. This marginalization is cutting the Church off from finding God's grace in differences which should serve as invitations to a more inclusive Church.

#### God's Book of Nature

Small changes in perspective, faithful to Jesus Christ and the long tradition of the Church, can enable insight and turn marginalization from an injustice into a fuller recognition of God's unfolding truth, love and unity. The signs have been accumulating for some time in what St. Augustine called God's book of nature. Even in God's book of nature truth is in the margins. To pursue the periphery is to be awed by God's wisdom and embarrassed by human pretensions. It was human to believe the heavens could be described with perfect circles, and so Ptolemy used Aristotle's premise of an Earth centered universe to construct cosmic motion as circles within circles. Even Copernicus and Galileo bent to the circular temper of the times in seeing the Earth's orbit around the sun as a circle instead of an ellipse. The evidence of an ellipse was in the margins, because the orbit was almost a circle. Isaac Newton brought definition and clarity to human

understanding by discovering laws of motion that explained why celestial orbits were elliptical.

Even the heavens have surprises. There were marginal differences between the predictions of Newtonian mechanics and the observed reality -- slight wobbles in the orbits of known planets. Astronomers used these marginal departures from Newton's theory to find the new planets of Neptune and Pluto. Yet this approach did not work for certain wobbles in Mercury's orbit. The marginal difference between Newtonian predictions and the observed data for Mercury was not understood until Albert Einstein re-conceptualized space and time with his General Theory of Relativity.

Truth remains in the margins, on the periphery of our vision. Our attention to this periphery, our journey to the margins, continues to be a great teacher, bringing us to a fuller but always incomplete understanding of what God has wrought in creation. We should not fear the margins, but embrace them. That is the path toward truth.

#### Change as the Engine of Creation

A cosmological perspective shows that what began with physics almost 14 billion years ago became chemistry as the stars formed and created the elements, and then became biology as second and third generation stars formed with planets like Earth, and then became human consciousness as we know it, after some four billion years of evolution on planet Earth. Those of faith will understand that this progression is not a mechanical reduction from physics but a vibrant and continuing unfolding of creation, each step contributing something new, something that could not be predicted from what had come before (Bernard Lonergan, S.J., *Insight*, p. 257).

This creation story is awesome, worthy of the God of our ancestors, and comes to us through God's book of nature. Thus the path of finding truth by going to the margins is God's path, a path that serves for the development of personal morality and Catholic social teaching as well as science. In many ways this is a surprise because it unifies science and religion in a common quest to explore the margins. But ours is a God of surprises.

Change is experienced by the individual in development from childhood to adulthood. Change is experienced by society in a different way in the course of development of new social structures and practices. Development from childhood to adulthood is mediated by the family and the community. Human knowledge of the mind teaches that this development is accompanied by neurological growth in the frontal cortex, where connections to more primitive structures in the brain gradually enable conscious control over bodily functions. By analogy, moral growth can be modeled in terms of gradual development of a spiritual cortex enabling control over more primitive inclinations of the conscious mind. Responsibility for these developments in the individual is centered on the conscience.

Human knowledge of society suggests an analogous course of development with respect to new social structures and practices. These new structures and practices are not initially understood and present opportunities which are taken advantage of, often by those whose primary interest is the self. Social structures and practices thereby arise and become entrenched without having been examined through the lens of justice. Catholic social teaching understands that it is necessary and appropriate that these social structures and practices be examined and reformed so as to make them more just.

Thus both the development of the individual and the development of society present the freedom and opportunity for behavior that is self-centered rather than other-centered. If human conscience is responsible for dealing with the human tendency to follow more primitive inclinations, thereby delaying individual development, then society is responsible for a comparable social conscience to deal with manifestations of a collective tendency to follow more primitive inclinations, thereby delaying development of society. But change itself is the engine of God's surprising creation.

### **Change in the Church**

And the surprises do not end with the idea that truth is in the margins for both science and

religion. There is a certain collegiality between scientists who do not see God because they reduce reality to physics and those of faith who hold fast to a dual reality, one for the cosmos and another for the Church. These faithful are willing to live with an evolutionary view of the cosmos provided that the signs of a changeless God are preserved in his Church. Both miss the dynamism of a living and loving God, the first because they miss God entirely by reducing reality to physics and the second -- our coreligionists -- because they are discomfited by change.

Those coreligionists who are averse to change in the Church must have their concerns addressed in order for our Church to respond effectively to the signs of the times. To put the matter directly, these coreligionists of ours believe that change in the Church undermines the rock of their salvation. Rocks don't change, or change so slowly that the changes are imperceptible. The accelerating pace of change in today's world together with persistent violence and lawlessness are seen as signs that civilized society is unraveling, and that the world is sliding toward chaos. And like the Israelites at the time of Moses, these coreligionists of ours see the path to salvation from this coming chaos as requiring a restoration of God as the source of immutable law. Church law, in particular, must be preserved as a bulwark against impending moral chaos.

Pope Francis is a blessing. We thought he was counseling our bishops and pastors -- many of whom are these coreligionists of ours, averse to change in the Church -- to accompany the people with dialogue and in charity. We thought he was urging them to tend to the wounded as if in a field hospital, and to acquire the smell of the sheep. If that is what we thought, we thought too narrowly. Francis asks no less of us. We too are called to a ministry of accompaniment with dialogue and in charity. These coreligionists of ours -- not only bishops and pastors, but friends and neighbors and many we do not know -- are in a field hospital, wounded by a fear that what they hold dear is about to change. Those who want the Church to change are called to become accustomed to this smell of the sheep in a different way, along a different path. This path has been brought to our attention by God's creation, as a surprise, from the margins of our consciousness. All the people of God -- who are coreligionists for each other -- are called to go to the periphery, and to go there with the joy of a missionary. Francis has been quite persistent in this

call, and has shown prescience in leading us along this different path.

Who are those on the margins? Who are those sheep whose smell teaches us about ourselves, about who we are in God's eyes? The Synod on the Family asks us these questions about those who experience family life across the globe, in different cultures and circumstances. Those responding to the survey that is the basis for this submission are in substantial consensus that current Church teachings marginalize same sex couples and those who divorce and remarry, and that this marginalization is unjust and must be changed. To a certain extent, more in some communities than in others, these Church teachings are being ignored in practice. However, the public formalities of marriage present issues that are particularly neuralgic because the Church as an institution plays a significant and public role. These public formalities are much less pronounced for Church teachings regarding the regulation of birth, which are also ignored in practice.

But it is clear that the need for change with respect to these Church teachings on the family cannot be addressed effectively unless those who see these Church teachings as unjust go to a different periphery, to those for whom the prospect of change in these Church teachings is an open wound. It is here that those who see change as a necessary response to injustice are called to engage in a ministry of accompaniment with dialogue and in charity.

All this woundedness -- as experienced by same sex couples barred from marriage by Church teachings, as experienced by those who are divorced and remarried barred from the Eucharist by Church teachings, as experienced by those who are troubled by Church teachings on the regulation of births, and as experienced by those who fear that the integrity of the Church itself would be compromised by changes in these Church teachings -- calls for the mercy of a field hospital whose ministry is to discern root causes and dress all these wounds together lest they continue to bleed separately. It is here that we should look for a better understanding of reality, so that we can continue to invest reality with love, which is our mission.

Remarkably -- and happily -- there is a simple and elegant resolution to all this woundedness. It is a resolution which seems obvious when stated, because it relies upon basic Church teachings. It relies upon the hierarchy of truths by which Jesus distinguished between the reign of God and the legal pretensions of

the Pharisees. It relies upon the biblical teachings of Jesus, understood as exhortations toward the reign of God working in tandem with mercy. It is a solution that meets the test Pope Francis has set for binding wounds in a field hospital: deal with the root causes of the wound, otherwise a bandage is of no use.