

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 2

The Gospel as Exhortation

The missionary zeal of followers of the Risen Christ is driven by the Spirit from within not by Church teachings from without. It is the same Spirit, whatever the gift (1 Cor. 12:1-11). In this Spirit Pope Francis said "If someone is gay and searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" It is this Spirit, written on every heart (Jer. 31:31-34), that is the source of the unity for which Christ prayed (John 17:20-23).

Jesus exhorted his followers to do more than Mosaic law required. Where the law said "do not murder" he said "do not be angry" (Matthew 5:21-22). Where the law said "do not commit adultery" he said "lusting after another is to commit adultery in one's heart" (Matthew 5:27-28). Where the law said "a divorce requires a certificate of divorce" he said "to divorce is to commit adultery" (Matthew 5:31-32; Mark 10:2-12). Where the law said "do not break your oath" he said "make no oath at all, simply say 'yes' or 'no'" (Matthew 5:33-37). Where the custom is "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" he said "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:38-39). Where you are sued for your shirt, give over your coat as well (Matthew 5:40). Where you are forced to go one mile, go two miles instead (Matthew 5:41). Where the custom is "love your neighbor, and hate your enemy" he said "love your enemy, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44)

These examples have in common a different frame of mind, a turn from being satisfied with compliance with the law and custom to seeking alignment with a perfect God (Matthew 5:48), which in our Trinitarian conception is alignment with the Spirit within. Perfection may not be possible, even if we follow our conscience as best we can, but a journey toward being more responsive to the Spirit

within is what Jesus is calling us to undertake. It is the journey in response to this call through which we participate in the coming-to-be of the reign of God. This journey can be undertaken and this participation can be made real in the hearts and minds of each of us, in communion with the whole Church. It is this journey beyond the law of Moses to a different frame of mind that fulfills the promise of Mosaic law and brings the kingdom that Jesus preached (Mark 1:15). And until that transition is completed, the law remains (Matthew 5:17-20).

It is that tension between the law and the reign of God that is at the root of tension within the Church between those calling for change and those holding fast to Church teachings as they are.

The journey toward being more responsive to the Spirit within is of a different character than compliance with the law of Moses. The standards of the law are enforced by the community. It is this enforcement regime which gives the law its character, and is the reason for practical accommodation to hardness of heart (Mark 10:5). The journey toward the Spirit is different. Whereas compliance with the law is judged from without by the community, the journey toward the Spirit is measured from within, by the Spirit and through conscience. The community can help with sharing of experience, but cultivating a closer connection to the Spirit is the responsibility of the individual. The community can imitate Jesus and use exhortations to prompt a Spirit filled frame of mind, but the connection to the Spirit is owned by the individual conscience.

The Example of Mercy Set by Jesus

The difference between community enforcement of law and the journey toward greater responsiveness to the Spirit within is illustrated by

the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11). Under Mosaic law the woman was to be stoned. But Jesus said, "let any one of you who is without sin cast the first stone." No one cast a stone, and Jesus then said, "I do not condemn you either. Go and leave your life of sin."

We do not have an account of what then happened to this woman, but the mercy shown her might well have set her on a journey toward a more attentive relationship to the Spirit within her. Such a journey may be long, but has a pattern and trajectory fundamentally different from methods of the law. Such a journey is accompanied by the discipline of conscience, whereas the law is accompanied by discipline of the community – in the case of this woman, the discipline of stoning.

The Spirit does not ask more than can be done, yet an exhortation ("go and sin no more") would have been challenging to this woman. By being merciful Jesus touched something in this woman's heart that might have given her hope in spite of failure, to keep her coming back to continue the journey. In this sense mercy serves as a midwife to a journey toward better alignment of this woman's will with the Spirit within her.

A Proposal for the Synod Fathers

What Jesus did for this woman caught in adultery is an example that can be followed, without changing Church teaching. The Church has long taught that there is a hierarchy of Church teachings. Not all teachings are given the same priority or effect. Law enforced by the community is one category of Church teachings; Gospel exhortations that serve the journey toward a closer connection to the Spirit written on the individual's heart are in a different category.

What Jesus did for this woman caught in adultery was simply change the category of the teaching. The teaching against adultery remains, but the mercy applied by Jesus took the teaching out of the category of law enforced by the community and set it as a Gospel exhortation within the context of a conscientious journey toward better alignment with the Spirit within.

The community enforcement regime of stoning was preempted by the mercy which Jesus showed this woman. This mercy was in service to the reign of God in the human heart, which goes beyond the justice of the law, as Thomas Aquinas understood (*Summa*, I.21.3).

In similar fashion, following the example of Jesus, the Synod Fathers can apply mercy in service

to the reign of God in the human heart by authorizing transfer of particular Church teachings from the category of law enforced by community discipline to Gospel exhortation, dispensing with community discipline in favor of the individual's conscientious journey with the Spirit. Mercy serves as a midwife for this journey, maintaining hope in the face of failure. It is the same Spirit of the one God in all of us, but journeys may be quite diverse and focus on different exhortations at different times. What is possible for one may not be possible for another, as judged by the Spirit. But common to all journeys is the joy of making an investment of love in the reality that exists.

This approach resolves a number of concerns. As survey results show, and as our survey confirms, in the current state of affairs a number of Church teachings on the family, teachings which are taken to be in the category of law enforced by the community, leave pastors silent or ineffective. Changing the category to Gospel exhortation would open up preaching toward maintaining hope and pursuing joy on the journey, whatever the struggles with conscience and circumstance. People can more appropriately focus on the real challenges of their journeys, seeking pastoral support as needed.

This approach also facilitates appropriate adaptation to regional or cultural differences. The needs of good order and discipline in a particular region or cultural context may suggest the use of community enforcement mechanisms that would not be appropriate or effective for a teaching in another region or cultural context.

A Dialogue with Those Opposed to Change in the Church

The above proposal is a contribution to a dialogue with those in the Church community – our coreligionists – who stand in Pope Francis' field hospital wounded by the prospect of change in Church teachings. The above proposal has been crafted to address the root causes of these wounds. The remarks preceding the proposal present in summary form a description of God's creation showing how change is manifest in a continuing unfolding of the cosmos consistent with both physics and a God of surprises, and how human understanding is advanced by going to the margins. Reality appears to be of a piece in this respect, with the same teachings about the character of change and the importance of seeking out the margins evident in both science and religion.

The remarks then preface the above proposal with a description of its roots in what Jesus said and did as recounted in the Gospels. Jesus preached the reign of God as going beyond the law, as a fulfillment, using language of exhortation. Finally, the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11) is given as an example of the very proposal presented: taking a teaching which under Mosaic law was enforced by the community and mercifully removing its community enforcement aspects so that it could support a journey toward a closer connection to the Spirit within. The role of mercy is to serve as a midwife to this journey, which itself is toward the reign of God which Jesus preached. What Jesus did by this example is to establish a category in the hierarchy of truths different from community enforced law, a category we have called "Gospel exhortation."

The point of this contribution to dialogue is to assuage concerns about the ill effects of change, and to provide a way of responding to injustice in the application of certain Church teachings related to the family by placing the teaching in a different category, indeed a more elevated category closer to the reign of God at the heart of Jesus' preaching.

Women in the Family and in the Church

The teachings of the institutional Church on women are believed by survey respondents to countenance the subordination of women, and these teachings are not being received. In the West these teachings strain the credibility of the Magisterium. In the Philippines it is believed that these teachings reflect a patriarchal social system that contributes to the physical and emotional abuse of women and girls. In India these teachings compromise what should be the Magisterium's prophetic role against a cultural subordination of women.

The Magisterium has repeatedly said that it has no authority to ordain women, a policy emblematic of teachings that subordinate women. While this is a more nuanced statement than the theologically contested notion that women cannot be ordained, this teaching remains a source of consternation for many of the faithful. The good faith efforts of the Magisterium to emphasize the unique role of women in the family are frequently understood as confirmation of a more basic subordination.

Admittedly, this subordination has long cultural roots, and these roots serve to ossify teachings that trace their origin to Christ's choice of men as the twelve apostles. But in the eyes of survey

respondents the Resurrection tells a contrary story, a story whose promise is being remarkably confirmed by the teachings of God's book of nature. These teachings show a cosmic unfolding of reality that places the Resurrection and the reign of God as the fruit of that unfolding, not interventions of God upon a separately created cosmos. The world continues to be made new by a gracious God. The Eucharist that we celebrate in remembrance of the Last Supper is recognition -- even for the doubting Thomases among us -- of a presence within the assembly of the Risen Christ, a presence even more awesome than the fleshly presence described by the Evangelists. Reality is more than flesh and blood; it is a fullness of life that is captured neither by words nor by conceptions born of earlier stages in the unfolding of the cosmos. In the Hebrew lexicon of the day, blood meant life. The words of flesh and blood used by the Evangelists were the most riveting they knew of to express a reality whose fullness was beyond their comprehension.

And so it can be for a more life affirming view of women, emerging out of prior conceptions that were not adequate to express the fullness of truth. More adequate conceptions do not overturn prior conceptions so much as fulfill their promise through *metanoia* (see Mark 1:15). The lesson of God's unfolding book of nature is that the inadequacy of prior conceptions is inherent, and the created cosmos groans for conceptions that more adequately express the fullness of life. At this time and place in the history of the Church the respondents to our survey call upon the Synod Fathers to make new, to reform and refresh, the teachings on women that are no longer in condition for reception.

We ask that our coreligionists who in good faith oppose such changes in Church teachings engage us on a journey of dialogue where our mutual humility is not to the concepts of those with whom we disagree but to the enduring love of the living God.