

Lessons from Aquinas in *Amoris Laetitia*

It may have escaped the notice of some readers of Pope Francis' Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* that the first quoted reference in Chapter One, after Genesis, Revelation and Matthew, is to Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), the Argentinian short-story writer, essayist, poet and translator, considered by critics as arguably "the most important figure in Spanish- language literature since Cervantes."² Francis calls him "the poet" and quotes from "Calle Desconocida," "The Unknown Path," a poem from Borges' first collection of poetry, *Fervor de Buenos Aires*, published in 1923.

The beautiful image quoted by Francis, "every home is like a lampstand," comes at the end of a long sentence starting with Jesus' description of the two houses, one built on rock and the other on sand, which, in the Pope's words, "symbolises any number of family situations shaped by the exercise of their members' freedom." This is not the usual interpretation put on the Gospel simile (Mt 7:24-27), but Francis links it to the Exhortation's opening remark that "The Bible is full of families, births, love stories and family crises," right from the appearance of Adam and Eve's family, "with all its burdens of violence and also its enduring strength" (§8).

Using the first six lines of Psalm 128 as a stepping stone, the Exhortation invites us to "cross the threshold of a tranquil home, with the family sitting around the festive table," with the father and mother at the centre, "a couple with their own personal story of love," and children at their side "like olive shoots" (§9).

This "idyllic picture" of a harmonious household contrasts sharply with "the presence of pain, evil and violence that break up families and their communion

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² Noah Wardrip Fruin, Nick Montfort eds. *The New Media Reader* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 29.

of life and love - a sombre dimension already present at the beginning, when through sin, the relationship of love and purity before man and woman turns into domination" (§19). "This thread of suffering and bloodshed," the author reminds us, runs through the pages of the Bible, starting with Cain's murder of his brother Abel and "the tragedies and violence marking the family of David," from which Jesus was descended, right down to the massacre of the Innocents by Herod and his henchmen after the birth of the Messiah, on account of which Jesus and his family "had to flee to a foreign land" (§§ 20-21). Herod may be seen as the prototype of a vast array of ruthless dictators who have marked the course of history. Francis mentions him again at the end of Chapter One as the despotic ruler whose "implacable violence" brought suffering "and even nightmares" to the Family of Nazareth (§30). Borges, incidentally, was a sworn enemy of dictatorial regimes and a fearless critic of all kinds of totalitarian systems, from Nazism and Communism to Fascism and Peronism. "Dictatorships," he once wrote, "breed oppression, servility, cruelty. More loathsome still is the fact that they breed idiocy, mere discipline usurping the place of clear thinking."³ The impossibility, moreover, of separating original sin from grace in the history of the human race and the life of its members is one of the themes pursued by Borges in his short stories.

Among the factors causing pain and disruption in modern families, the Exhortation mentions unemployment, poverty, hunger (§25), social degradation resulting from brutal exploitation of the earth's resources (§26), the lack of dignified or affordable housing, inadequate health care, long working hours and badly paid jobs (§44), war, terrorism and organised crime (§45).

A long paragraph talks about migration and its negative effects on family life. It quotes at length from the Synod's final report (2015, 23), noting that "forced migration of families, resulting from situations of war, persecutions, poverty and injustice, and marked by the vicissitudes of a journey that puts lives at risk, traumatizes people and destabilizes families," often forcing those who migrate to leave family members behind (§46).

The Exhortation mentions drug abuse ("one of the scourges of our time"), alcoholism, gambling and other addictions as "causing immense suffering and the breakup of many families" (§51). It also refers to domestic violence and "the shameful ill-treatment to which women are sometimes subjected" as "craven acts of cowardice" on the part of men.

³ From a speech written by Borges for the Argentinian Society of Writers (SADE), in Edwin Williamson, *Borges: A Life* (New York: Viking, 2004), 295.

All this is a far cry from the kind of idyllic picture of the “tranquil festive table” described at the beginning of Chapter One. In the introduction to the Exhortation, Francis expresses his gratitude to the many contributions made by the Synod Fathers which helped him “to appreciate more fully the problems faced by families throughout the world” (§4) and to deal with them honestly, realistically and creatively. “The complexity of the issues that arose,” Francis observes, “revealed the need for continued open discussion of a number of doctrinal, moral, spiritual, and pastoral questions” (§2). Two attitudes needed to be avoided for greater clarity to be achieved in such matters: “an immoderate desire for total change without sufficient reflection or grounding” on the one hand, and “an attitude that would solve everything by applying general rules or deriving undue conclusions from particular theological considerations” on the other (§2). In the chapters following the introduction, Francis shows by example how one can avoid the second pitfall not by rejecting change but by grounding it in sound philosophical and theological reflection.

Amoris Laetitia uses a number of sources to deal with the questions it raises, including the Scriptures, the two Synod reports, especially the final report of the Second Synod (2015), as well as previous Papal documents and the author’s own catechetical instructions. But it also makes frequent use of Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* (henceforth ST), and it is with those passages in the Exhortation that refer to Aquinas that this essay is (mainly) concerned.

Just as Borges appears at the beginning of Chapter One of the Exhortation, the first reference to Aquinas (Chapter Four, §99) follows a quote from another Latin American writer, the Mexican poet and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature Octavio Paz (1914-1988). Francis is commenting on the word “aschemonei,” which picks out one of the qualities of love mentioned by Paul in 1 Cor 13:4-7, a word that indicates that love is not rude, harsh or impolite, but gentle, thoughtful and pleasant. It is at this point that Francis quotes the Mexican poet’s definition of courtesy as “a school of sensitivity and disinterestedness” which requires a person “to develop his or her mind and feelings, learning how to listen, to speak and, at certain times, to keep quiet.”⁴ Francis adds that this is not something a Christian may choose to reject, but “an essential requirement of love,” and he supports this claim by quoting Thomas to the effect that “every human being is bound to live agreeably with those around him.”⁵ “Every day,” Francis continues, “entering into the life of another, even when that person already has a part to

⁴ Octavio Paz, *La llama doble* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1993), 35.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (STh) II-II 114.2, ad 1.

play in our life, demands the sensitivity and restraint which can renew trust and respect. Indeed, the deeper love is, the more it calls for respect for the other's freedom and the ability to wait until the other opens the door to his or her heart" (§99).

Chapter Four, from which this passage is taken, reads like an exercise in virtue ethics, where the virtues listed by Paul constitute the main features or properties of love. For Aquinas, as for Aristotle, virtues are acquired by habit and manifest themselves in action. This comes out clearly in the Exhortation's discussion of generosity as another defining feature of love, where generously serving others is considered far more noble than loving oneself (§101). In Aquinas' words, quoted in the text, "it is more proper to charity to desire to love than to desire to be loved,"⁶ so much so that "mothers, who are those who love the most, seek to love more than to be loved."⁷ Willing the good of other persons for their sake, rather than to fulfil our own needs, is what Aquinas means by generosity. And the rationale of generosity is love.⁸

Following Aristotle, Aquinas describes conjugal love as "the greatest form of friendship."⁹ The Exhortation elaborates: "It is a union possessing all the traits of a good friendship: concern for the good of the other, reciprocity, intimacy, warmth, stability and the resemblance born of a shared life" (§123).

As one would expect given the title of the Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* talks at some length about the joy and beauty of love. Here again Aquinas is quoted in the body of the text. For him the word "joy" refers to an expansion of the heart.¹⁰ It increases our pleasure and helps us find fulfilment in any number of things, even at those times of life when physical pleasure has ebbed (§126). Loving another person, then, involves appreciating their inner beauty and sacredness - "their great worth"¹¹ - beyond their physical or psychological appeal, and without feeling the need to possess them (§126).

Where feelings and desires are concerned, readers of the Exhortation are reminded that for Aquinas "experiencing an emotion is not, in itself, morally good or bad."¹² The stirring of desire or repugnance is neither sinful nor blameworthy. What is morally good or bad is what we do on the basis of, or under the influence

⁶ *STb* II-II 27.1, ad 2.

⁷ *STb* II-II 27.1.

⁸ See John Finnis, *Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 311.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 123; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8, 12.

¹⁰ *STb* I-II 31.3, ad 3.

¹¹ *STb* I-II 26.3.

¹² *STb* I-II 24.1.

of a given passion (§145). Marital life tries to ensure that one's entire emotional life benefits the family as a whole. A family is mature when the emotional life of its members does not stifle their freedom but allows it to grow,¹³ "springs from it, enriches, perfects and harmonises it in the service of all" (§146).

Training the emotions and instincts, the Exhortation goes on to say, is necessary and sometimes requires setting limits. It mentions two points made by Aquinas: first, that "excess, lack of control or obsession with a single form of pleasure can end up weakening and tainting that very pleasure";¹⁴ and secondly, that controlling one's emotions "does not mean renouncing moments of intense enjoyment,¹⁵ but rather integrating them with other moments of generous commitment, patient hope, inevitable weariness and struggle to achieve an ideal" (§148).

Following the two central chapters on love (the fourth and the fifth), Chapter Six highlights some pastoral approaches that could lead to the formation of well-functioning families, followed by Chapter Seven which deals with the raising and education of children. While Chapters One and Two described some of the factors of a political, social or economic nature (war, poverty, unemployment, lack of decent housing, forced migration etc) that led to the disruption of families, as it were "from the outside," Chapter Eight deals in great detail with the internal causes responsible for the breakup of marriages and family life. Whereas in cases of the former type, the family members themselves can hardly be held responsible for the disruption, since they can do very little, or virtually nothing, to change the situation they find themselves in, in cases of the latter type some kind of moral assessment of the actions of the individual members of the family group may be appropriate. Once again, Thomas Aquinas plays an important role in providing useful guidelines for making such an assessment. (A caveat is necessary before we proceed. Cases of drug abuse, gambling, alcoholism and other addictions, as well as instances of domestic violence and the shameful treatment of women and children mentioned in Chapter Two, are obviously also subject to moral judgement.)

The importance of Chapter Eight is highlighted by Francis in the introduction, where he says that while married couples will be more concerned with Chapters Four and Five, and pastoral ministries with Chapter Six, "everyone should feel challenged by Chapter Eight," which starts by quoting the Synod Fathers as exhorting the Church to "accompany with attention those who show signs of

¹³ *STb* I-II 59.5.

¹⁴ *STb* I-II 32.7.

¹⁵ *STb* II-II 153.2, ad 2.

a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence, like a beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among the people to enlighten those who have lost their way, or who are in the middle of a storm.”¹⁶

In another simile Francis compares the task of the Church to “that of a field hospital” (§291). He insists that pastors need to enter into dialogue with those who live in situations which do not correspond to the Church’s teachings on marriage. Quoting from one of his own homilies, Francis says that he wants to reiterate something he “sought to make clear to the whole Church, lest we take the wrong path,” namely, that “there are two ways of thinking which recur throughout the Church’s history: casting off and reinstating,” adding that “the Church’s way, from the time of the Council of Jerusalem, has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement.”¹⁷ “Consequently,” the Pope continues, “there is a need to avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situations and to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition”¹⁸ (§296).

Francis himself shows, by means of examples, how different such situations can be even in the case of divorce, and reminds pastors of the need of “adequately distinguishing” between them. Quoting Pope Benedict XVI, he insists that no “easy recipes” exist (§298).

For this reason, he adds, “neither the Synod nor this Exhortation could be expected to provide a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases.” And since “the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases,”¹⁹ “the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same” (§300). “A subject may know full well the rule, yet have great difficulty in understanding its values, or be in a concrete situation which does not allow him to act differently and decide otherwise.” Mitigating factors may exist “which limit the ability to make a decision.”²⁰ Francis quotes “Saint Thomas Aquinas himself” as having “recognised that someone may possess grace and charity, yet not be

¹⁶ The Synod of Bishops, *Relatio Synodi*: “The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization,” 2014, 28, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141018_relatio-synodi-familia_en.html.

¹⁷ Pope Francis’s Homily at Mass with the New Cardinals, 15 February 2005, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 107 (2015): 257.

¹⁸ The Synod of Bishops, *The Final Report*: “The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World,” 2015, 51, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20151026_relazione-finale-xiv-assembly_en.html.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

able to exercise any one of the virtues well.”²¹ Even Saints, Thomas adds, may “experience difficulty” in practising what certain virtues require, “even though they have the habits of all the virtues”²² (§301).

Francis follows this up by quoting at length from the Catechism of the Catholic Church which again mentions these “mitigating factors,” claiming that “imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors.”²³ For this reason, Francis continues, “a negative judgement about an objective situation does not imply a judgement about the imputability or culpability of the person involved.” And he quotes approvingly “what many Synod Fathers wanted to affirm,” namely, that “under certain circumstances people find it difficult to act differently. Therefore, while upholding a general rule, it is necessary to recognize that responsibility with respect to certain actions is not the same in all cases ... Even the consequences of actions taken are not necessarily the same in all cases”²⁴ (§302).

In the next paragraph the Exhortation talks about conscience. Aquinas called the habitual knowledge of the primary moral principles *synderesis* and the act of applying moral principles to particular actions *conscientia*.²⁵ John Finnis explains: “One’s conscience [for Aquinas] is the judgement (*sententia*) one reaches in trying to *apply* practical principles ... to particular (types) of situations in which one is deliberating about, or at least contemplating, acting, or is reflecting on what one did.”²⁶ Conscience may be erroneous, whether through our own fault or through some cause for which we are not responsible.²⁷ An erroneous conscience is morally binding simply because to the person in error it seems to be stating the truth, and so (however monstrous my error) I cannot defect from my conscience without being guilty of a willingness to act “contrary to the truth.”²⁸ If our conscience tells us that we ought to perform a particular act, it is our moral duty to perform it.²⁹ “Every conscience,” Aquinas insists, “whether it is right or wrong, whether it concerns things evil in themselves or

²¹ *STb* I-II 65.3 ad 2; Thomas Aquinas, *De Malo*, 2, art. 2.

²² *STb* I-II 65.3 ad 2.

²³ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1735, 2352.

²⁴ The Synod of Bishops, *The Final Report*, 85.

²⁵ *STb* I 79.12-13. See Frederick Copleston, *Aquinas* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 228, n.1.

²⁶ Finnis, *Aquinas*, 123, n. 101.

²⁷ Copleston, *Aquinas*, 228.

²⁸ *STb* I-II 19; Finnis, *Aquinas*, 123.

²⁹ Copleston, *Aquinas*, 228.

things morally indifferent, obliges us to act in such a way that he who acts against his conscience sins.”³⁰ As Copleston makes clear, “this does not mean that there is no such thing as an objectively correct moral conscience, but ignorance and mistakes are possible in moral matters, and the nearer we come to particulars the greater is the field for error.”³¹

The Exhortation therefore states that “while every effort should be made to encourage the development of an enlightened conscience,” there may be cases where, while recognising “that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel,” one may also at the same time recognise “with sincerity and honesty” that “it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one’s limits” (§303).

Following these considerations, Francis asserts that “it is reductive simply to consider whether or not an individual’s actions correspond to a general law or rule, because that is not enough to discern and ensure full fidelity to God in the concrete life of a human being” (§304). The tone he uses at this point indicates how strongly Francis supports Thomas on this matter. “I earnestly ask,” he writes, “that we always recall a teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas and learn to incorporate it in our potential discernment.” And he goes on to quote a well-known passage from the *Summa Theologiae* which makes the point that “although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects,” and that “in matters of action, truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all, as to matters of detail, but only as to the general principles; and when there is the same rectitude in matters of detail, it is not equally known to all. The principle will be found to fail, according as we descend further into detail.”³² Francis develops the argument further. “It is true,” he writes that:

General rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all practical situations. At the same time it must be said that, precisely for that reason, what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule. That would not only lead to an intolerable casuistry, but would endanger the very values which must be preserved with special care (§304).

In a footnote on the same page, Francis draws attention to the text in which, “referring to the general knowledge of the rule and the particular knowledge of

³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Quodlibetum*, III.27.2.

³¹ Copleston, *Aquinas*, 228.

³² *STh* I-II 94.4.

practical discernment, Saint Thomas states that if only one of the two is present, it is preferable that it is the knowledge of the particular reality, which is closer to the act.”³³ “For this reason,” the Exhortation continues, “a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in ‘irregular’ situations, as if they were stones to throw at people’s lives.” In the same spirit, the Pope expresses full agreement with the International Theological Commission’s remark that “natural law could not be presented as an already established set of rules that impose themselves *a priori* on the moral subject; rather, it is a source of objective inspiration for the deeply personal process of making decisions”³⁴ (§305).

What the Pope’s *Exhortation* shows, especially in Chapter Eight, is that there can be no proper moral assessment of human actions without an adequate understanding of human psychology. Francis finds in Thomas Aquinas the kind of philosophical/ psychological theory that can fill that role and satisfy that condition. For on Aquinas’ account, as one leading scholar has described it, a person:

Wills only what the intellect presents at that time as good under some description. Acts of will, then, are for something apprehended or cognised as good at a particular time and in particular circumstances, as distinct from something which is good considered unconditionally or abstractly. Besides happiness and the vision of God, all other things are such that they can in principle be considered good under some descriptions and not good under others, so that there is nothing about them which must constrain the will of any agent always to want them.³⁵

This may give rise to situations where the intellect “influenced by the will, may be moved by opposed desires to represent the thing in question as both good (under one description) and not good (under a different description).”³⁶ Conversely, “the intellect need not present one simple, unified result to the will.”³⁷ Furthermore, as we have seen, “the influence of the passions may also complicate the case.”³⁸

³³ Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia Libri Ethicorum*, VI, 6.

³⁴ International Theological Commission, “In Search of a Universal Ethic. A New Look at Natural Law,” (2009), 59, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20090520_legge-naturale_en.html. The need to exercise humane reasonableness (*epieikeia*) as a corrective to the inadequacies of law is discussed by Aristotle in his examination of (particular) justice in *Nicomachean Ethics* V (1137a31-1138a3).

³⁵ Eleonore Stump, “Aquinas’s Account of Freedom: Intellect and Will,” *The Monist* 80/4 (2002): 580.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 582.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Amoris Laetitia is full of references to Aquinas and is strongly influenced by his thought. The central philosophical argument that in morality there is a need to avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of problems and situations derives directly from him. So does the view that when things go wrong, the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases, and that a negative judgement about an objective situation does not imply a judgement about the person involved; for as Aquinas shows, although one may be clear about general principles, the more one descends to matters of detail, the more frequently one encounters difficulties in determining what one should do. The Exhortation's reflections on conscience, the virtues, marital love, and the upbringing of children owe a lot to Aquinas' teachings, and it is for this reason that Francis invites his readers, especially those engaged in pastoral work, to be inspired by those teachings and to incorporate them in their approach. *Amoris Laetitia* can do this because, as John Finnis observes, "the natural soundness of Aquinas' theorizing, its explanatory power, and detachment from the conditions of his own time, and even his own life, contributes greatly to its lasting worth."³⁹

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³⁹ Finnis, *Aquinas*, 14.