

PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL OF THE HOSPITABLE FAMILY

DENNIS T. GONZALEZ

*With the help of a selection of texts from the Bible, official Church documents, and some contemporary theologians, this paper shall propose and discuss what it considers a better expression to "Gospel of the Family," which is used by the apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*. For this purpose, the paper shall attempt to clarify the understanding and practice of Christian hospitality, and offer some insights that emerge when hospitality is related to marital life, missionary and pastoral activity, and ecological responsibility.*

INTRODUCTION

Pope Francis Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), affirms that Christian families proclaim the "Gospel of the Family today"¹ primarily through "their joy-filled witness as domestic churches."² This Gospel "responds to the deepest expectations of the human person: a response to each one's dignity and fulfilment in reciprocity, communion and fruitfulness."³ Thus, pastoral care for families "needs unambiguously to denounce cultural, social, political and economic factors – such as the excessive importance given to market logic – that prevent authentic family life and lead to discrimination, poverty, exclusion, and violence."⁴

¹ *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), 200.

² *Relatio Synodi* (RS), 30. This was the final document of the 2014 Extraordinary Synod on the Family.

³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

This paper will point out an age-old shadow in the family as an enduring institution, and unfortunately *AL* does not acknowledge this shadow. Awareness of this shadow may make us ambivalent about the expression “Gospel of the Family.” Then, with the help of a selection of texts from the Bible, official Church documents, and some contemporary theologians, this paper shall propose and discuss what can be considered a better expression, namely, “Gospel of the Hospitable Family.” The paper shall attempt to clarify the understanding and practice of Christian hospitality, and offer some insights that emerge when hospitality is related to marital life, missionary and pastoral activity, and ecological responsibility.

AGE-OLD SHADOW

It is good that *AL* specifies many of the economic, political, and cultural challenges that contemporary families face such as “lack of employment opportunities,”⁵ and “migration,”⁶ among others. A significant reality and challenge that is unacknowledged in *AL*, however, is the age-old shadow of idolatry of the family, or the priority of family interest over the common good, especially with the reality of clannishness, tribalism, or political dynasties in many locales and States throughout history.

I believe that the evangelization of the family should not forget the words of Jesus which radically redefines his family: “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mt 12:50). Jesus proclaimed the Gospel of God’s Reign or *Kindom*, one image of which is the gathering of peoples, especially estranged peoples, to feast on “God’s abundance” of gifts “for renewed community.”⁷ Jesus declared his conviction: “Many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob at the Kindom of heaven” (8:11).

⁵ *AL*, 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷ See John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 26-45.

God's Kindom is much more important than any treasured ties based on blood, marriage, affinity, descent, or the decision of guardians or authority figures. Thus, Christ has declared: "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (10:37). Among faithful followers of Christ, (baptismal) water is thicker than blood. Water in the Holy Spirit is weightier than ancestral blood.

Jesus rejects any idolatry of the family, and thus conscientious pastors, missionaries, and theologians ought to consider the possibility that a "Gospel of the Family" might turn into a betrayal of the true Gospel in contexts in which clannishness or tribalism prevails to the detriment of the common good, or to the exclusion of those considered outsiders or minority groups. In reference to one of the shadows in Filipino family and social life, the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II), a solemn gathering of the Catholic episcopate, and selected priests, religious superiors, and lay leaders, asserted:

Unity is sometimes solely based on ties of flesh and blood. The family community itself consequently becomes insensitive to the greater demands of the common good. When this happens, the families no longer care to participate in the development of society or the mission of the Church.⁸

Especially among some members of the elite, the welfare, comfort, prosperity, or political power of their families is their concern above all. The unequal access to politico-economic power in many struggling societies contributes considerably to the pervasiveness and persistence of poverty, which in turn contributes to the dissolution of many marriages⁹ and to the decision of many couples to live together and delay, or do without, a church wedding, which in some locales is deemed "too expensive."¹⁰ "Economic

⁸ Conciliar Document, in *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Manila: Paulines Publishing House, 1992), 582.

⁹ RS, 8.

¹⁰ Ibid., 42.

difficulties” constitute one of the significant obstacles to “the responsible procreation and education of children.”¹¹

The new family of Jesus comprises those who welcome the will of heaven, which finds a home in their hearts. Thus, I humbly propose to specify that what Christians proclaim, or to which we bear witness, is not a Gospel of the Family that can turn exclusive or exclusionary, but a Gospel of the Hospitable or Welcoming Family, which in its faithful and fruitful love becomes “a true, living icon – not an idol”¹² of God the Creator, Savior and Sanctifier.

NEW TESTAMENT HOSPITALITY

A Gospel of the Hospitable Family entails remembering afresh the practice of hospitality in the stories of Jesus and the early communities of believers. Jesus valued hospitality when he sent the Twelve to preach the good news and heal the sick in villages throughout Galilee, and he instructed them to take no money, bag and extra shirt, for they were to hope for, and rely on, the hospitality of households that would welcome them (Mt 10:5-11). The mission of the disciples involved the acceptance and offering of gifts: they were travelling strangers who would be receptive to the gift of hospitality, which included food and shelter, and they would offer their gifts of healing and good news.

It is possible that the historical Jesus at some time gave the following instructions to his disciples: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.” (10:5-6) Does this text suggest that, during his Galilean ministry, there was in him some germ of cultural prejudice or xenophobia? Or does it show his wisdom in initiating his disciples, his trainees for Kingdom mission and outreach, to start with the familiar, specifically, the harassed and helpless among their fellow Galileans, rather than with the unfamiliar or less familiar like Gentiles and Samaritans?

¹¹ Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP) II, 584.

¹² AL, 11.

The apostle Paul benefited from and promoted “house church hospitality.”¹³ He urged fellow believers to cherish God’s mercy through Christ and his Gospel by avoiding complacency and by offering their bodies as “a living sacrifice” (Rom 12:1). One of the ways in which believers can practice the sacrificial life in a world that at times can be hostile to them is the following: “Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality [*philoxenia*]” (12:13). According to Ana Maria Pineda of the Religious Sisters of Mercy:

Xenos, the word that means ‘stranger’ in Greek, also means ‘guest’ and ‘host’...*xenophobia* [is] fear of the stranger...*philoxenia* [is] a love of the guest or stranger. *Philoxenia* can also mean love of the whole atmosphere of hospitality and the whole activity of guesting and hosting.¹⁴

FAMILY AND HOSPITALITY IN CHURCH DOCUMENTS

The *Relatio Synodi* (RS) did not mention hospitality, but near its conclusion it offered an image of the Church as a people who are characterized by hospitality: “The Church can assume a valuable role in supporting families, starting with Christian Initiation, by being welcoming communities.”¹⁵ In the case of *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), this image is found: “A people for everyone... The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.”¹⁶

In its *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* (1965), Vatican II mentions “active hospitality” as one of the ways in which the family accomplishes its divine “mission of being the primary vital cell of society,” and it lists the following “among the various works of the

¹³ See Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 61-65.

¹⁴ Ana Maria Pineda, “Hospitality,” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), 33-34.

¹⁵ RS, 61.

¹⁶ EG, 114.

family apostolate... adopting abandoned children, showing a loving welcome to strangers, helping with the running of schools...supporting married people and families involved in material and moral crises.”¹⁷

The *Relatio Synodi* mentions the adoption of children as an expression of “openness to life,” and it says:

The adoption of children, orphans and the abandoned and accepting them as one’s own is a specific form of the family apostolate (see *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, III, 11)...Such a choice is a powerful sign of family love, an occasion to witness to one’s faith and to restore the dignity of a son or daughter to a person who has been deprived of this dignity.¹⁸

Amoris Laetitia, for its part, expands the “fruitfulness” of marital and family love to implicitly include the practice of hospitality as follows: “Open and caring families find a place for the poor and build friendships with those less fortunate than themselves.”¹⁹ It also states:

Openness (to life) finds particular expression in hospitality, which the word of God eloquently encourages: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb 13:2).²⁰

Amoris Laetitia exhibits an inclusive orientation, as it challenges couples and families, in expanding the fruitfulness of their love, to “go forth from their homes in a spirit of solidarity with others... [and with] clear awareness of their social obligations.”²¹ Furthermore, *AL* asserts that “God has given the

¹⁷ *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 11.

¹⁸ *RS*, 58.

¹⁹ *AL*, 183.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 324.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

family the job of *domesticating* the world”²² or turning the world into a home for everybody or a place where nobody, especially the poor or the little one, is left lonely, homeless, estranged, or unwelcome. In this light, a traditional and timely way Christian couples and families expand the fruitfulness of their love is through the practice of hospitality.

CLARIFYING CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY

What is Christian hospitality? It is “the practice of providing space where the stranger is taken in and known as one who bears gifts.”²³ The stranger is not just the foreigner, but can be the homeless person, the orphan, the evacuee, the refugee, the outcast, the abandoned, the forgotten, or the estranged member of the household or community. For many Catholic persons and households, who are the strangers in their midst and with whom they feel uncomfortable? Poor or poorer households, economic migrants, persons with physical or mental disabilities, couples in complex relationships, or kin and co-workers in homosexual relationships?

Every stranger in need, even without belongings, bears the gift of his or her joyful and sorrowful memories and stories, which can offer real-life lessons. “Strangers have stories to tell which we have never heard before, stories which can redirect our seeing and stimulate our imaginations.”²⁴ For the believer, however, the ultimate gift is the mysterious presence of the Lord and the divine word in the person of the stranger in need (Mt 25:35). Pope Francis says: “Whenever we encounter in love another person, we learn something new about God. Whenever our eyes are opened to acknowledge the other, we grow in the light of faith and knowledge of God.”²⁵

²² Ibid., 183.

²³ Pineda, “Hospitality,” 31.

²⁴ Thomas Ogletree, *Hospitality to the Stranger: Dimensions of Moral Understanding* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1985), 3.

²⁵ EG, 272.

When Christ is welcomed as guest in the hearts or lives of believers, a transformation occurs in which the guest becomes the host who makes believers feel at home in God's presence and who offers the gift of wisdom, light, energy, and rest or relief from suffering. For example, Jesus was a guest at dinner in Matthew's house in which "many tax collectors came and ate with him and his disciples," but he became the gracious host in showing them God's gift of mercy and friendship (Mt 9:10-13). In turn, Matthew the host became a guest, as he experienced the welcoming and gracious presence of God through Jesus.

For another example, at the wedding at Cana in the fourth gospel (Jn 2:1-11), Jesus arrives as a guest at the wedding, but when the wine runs out, he provides so much superior wine, and thus he symbolically and effectively becomes the bridegroom and the host.²⁶ It, however, is significant that, in the gospels, Jesus "is also portrayed as a stranger who is sometimes welcomed but more often rejected."²⁷ As the prologue of the fourth gospel puts it: "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him...he gave the right to become children of God." (1:11-12)

Christian hospitality "involves creating space where people can learn and practice how to receive and give,"²⁸ and where guests can turn into hosts, and hosts into guests. Thus, Christian mission to the lost and the least can be imagined as an adventure of mutual hospitality in which strangers become guests and hosts, and hosts become guests.

HOSPITALITY, MUTUALITY, AND MARRIAGE

Such an understanding of mission and hospitality resembles that of married life, as there is in the sacrament of matrimony "mutual self-giving" and mutual receptivity to or

²⁶ Pineda, "Hospitality," 34.

²⁷ Christine Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012) Kindle edition, location 3896.

²⁸ Pineda, "Hospitality," 36.

acceptance of the other.²⁹ Each spouse has made the commitment to open one's heart, one's inner house or sanctuary, to the other spouse and to keep it open for life, so that spouses regularly turn into guests and hosts of each other's inner house.

The lack of mutuality or mutual consent among spouses was perhaps one of the reasons for the opposition of the historical Jesus to the practice of divorce in his patriarchal society. Except perhaps in the case of Jewish women of wealth or noble lineage, the decision to divorce could be made by the man alone through a certificate of divorce given to the woman (Deut 24:1), and it was not unusual for the woman to find herself in a worse or dire economic condition afterwards. It was not unusual for a divorce to be unfair to a peasant woman. Jesus cared for women who yearned for healing, right relationships, or relief from suffering (Mt 9:20-22; 15:21-28) and unlike other authoritative teachers in his time, he welcomed female disciples (27:55-56).

After his statements on divorce and "eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom" (19:12), Jesus welcomed the little children (19:13-15). They usually are the ones who endure the most suffering when their parents undergo divorce. Such suffering is a form of "injustice which very often is associated with divorce."³⁰ The dissolution of a marriage and its aftermath almost always make it more difficult for a household to be a hospitable or favorable place for little children.

At the same time, this question ought to be considered: even if he was primarily concerned about the fate of the woman and the children after a divorce, could the wise Jesus have wanted to give a rock-hard teaching on divorce and the indissolubility of marriage, when he was aware that his primary interlocutors were some authority figures who "came to test (or trap) him" (19:3)?

ACTIVE HOSPITALITY

Missionary activity and pastoral care for those who suffer from homelessness, abandonment, neglect, discrimination, exclusion, persecution, or wounded relationships can be

²⁹ *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), 48.

³⁰ RS, 247.

envisioned as a venture in mutual and active hospitality in which space is created for everybody to receive and share gifts. Active hospitality does not merely wait for the homeless, the stranger, and the estranged to come and beg for shelter or help. Believers go out to meet them in the streets or to look for their huts, hovels, or holes-in-the-wall in order to invite them into welcoming hearts and hearths and to ask them to share the gifts of their presence, feelings, memories, and stories. Active hospitality is a creative and faithful way to practice the command of the Most Holy One: "Love the stranger as yourself" (Lev 19:34).

Pope Francis urges pastors, pastoral servants, and ordinary believers to go and reach out to fellow believers in complex or broken relationships especially those who feel estranged from the institutional Church. About the estrangement of some Catholics who feel like unwelcome strangers in the Church, one reads this description in the *Instrumentum Laboris (IL)* for the 2014 Extraordinary Synod on the Family:

Persons who are separated, divorced or single parents sometimes feel unwelcome in some parish communities...some clergy are uncompromising and insensitive in their behavior; and, generally speaking...the Church, in many ways, is perceived as exclusive, and not sufficiently present and supportive.³¹

Just as the Body of Christ cannot turn its back on those who suffer from poverty and disease, it cannot be heartless toward those who suffer from estrangement, wounded families, and unhealthy relationships. As Vatican II affirms:

The Church encompasses with her love all those who are afflicted by human misery and she recognizes in those who are poor and who suffer, the image of her poor and suffering founder. She does

³¹ IL, 75.

all in her power to relieve their need and in them
she strives to serve Christ.³²

HOSPITALITY AND PASTORAL ACCOMPANIMENT

Missionaries, pastors and pastoral agents, including married couples and their families, who reach out to vulnerable or fragile families and couples in complex relationships, have to do so with sensitivity and receptivity to their real-life stories and struggles and the day-to-day signs of how “the grace of God works also in their lives” such as their everyday energy “to care for one another in love and to be of service to the community in which they live and work.”³³

Another sign of God’s grace at work in persons in complex and difficult relationships is the deep thirst for love, and this is portrayed in the passionate interaction between two strangers, Jesus and the Samaritan woman in social intercourse at the well (Jn 4:4-26). Although Christ in the fourth gospel expressed a pervasive belief of Second-Temple Judaism that “You Samaritans worship what you do not know...for salvation is from the Jews,” (4:22)³⁴ he understood the deep thirst for love in an outspoken stranger who endured the rejection of six men, five of whom likely divorced her, while the latest one cohabited with but refused to marry her.

It would be a practice of both wisdom and humility for missionaries and pastoral agents who want to proclaim the Gospel of the Hospitable Family to be receptive to, or to seek first, the day-to-day signs of grace, God’s self-giving, in the lives of vulnerable families and couples in crisis, and to acknowledge, to show appreciation for, and to learn from these signs of self-giving, and to let themselves be surprised by such signs of grace.

³² *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

³³ RS, 25. See also AL, 294.

³⁴ I recognize that a few gospel texts show shades of prejudice or even xenophobia, but to discuss them is beyond the scope of this paper. It should not be surprising that the historical Jesus was exposed to fellow Galileans who bore the germ of ethnic bias or cultural prejudice, as he grew up and lived in an ancient society that experienced the oppressive and corrupting rule of foreign empires.

After receiving the gifts of initial welcome and encouraging signs of grace, missionaries and pastoral agents can offer their gifts of compassionate and the practice of patient pastoral “accompaniment,” and the timely and eventual challenge to couples or family members to proceed to the next or higher stage of growth in their relationship with God, their interpersonal relationship, and their participation in the life, worship, and mission of the Church.³⁵ “To find the right way to gain their trust, their openness, and their readiness to grow,” wise discernment is necessary on the part of pastoral agents who accompany them.³⁶

Christine Pohl asserts: “The practice of discernment becomes crucial because not everyone can be welcomed into every context, and knowing how and when to ‘close the door’ is a requisite for survival” of communities of hospitality which strive to be creatively faithful to their tradition of holiness.³⁷ She adds: “The God of Scripture calls us to hospitality and also to faithfulness to a particular way of life.”³⁸ As for Pineda, she reminds us:

Hospitality is made up of hard work undertaken under risky conditions, and without structures and commitments for welcoming strangers, fear crowds out what needs to be done...We need to develop ways of supporting one another in the practice of hospitality.³⁹

For example, during an epidemic of a highly transmissible disease, how may households and communities of believers practice hospitality, or bridge social distances even as they keep safe physical distances between people? Pastors and ordinary believers need to ask and to keep on seeking practical answers to this question: How can we weave “hospitable patterns of life”⁴⁰ in our households, communities, institutions, and particular contexts? “Hospitality

³⁵ See AL, 303-305.

³⁶ EG, 172.

³⁷ Pohl, *Living into Community*, location 3876.

³⁸ Ibid., location 4066.

³⁹ Pineda, “Hospitality,” 35.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 37.

can be overwhelming if we are not careful to nurture our lives (through periods of prayer, celebration and rest) or if we try to do it alone” or outside communal or institutional contexts.⁴¹

HOSPITALITY AND ECOLOGY

A “Gospel of the Hospitable Family” is relevant in our time of ecological crisis and anthropogenic climate change. Jesus once said, “foxes have holes and birds have nests,” but humans are homeless (Mt 8:20) usually because of indebtedness, greed, aggression, or war. In our times, many humans are still homeless, while the foxes are losing their holes and the birds their nests with the destruction of their habitats. Human activities are rapidly depriving endangered species, climate change refugees, and vulnerable households and communities of hospitable and habitable places and spaces where they can thrive.

In discussing “the Wisdom of the Biblical Accounts” in his ecological encyclical, *Laudato Si (LS)*, Pope Francis includes the following text from the Torah: “The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers’ (Lev 25:23).”⁴² The Creator is the ultimate owner and master of the earth, the shared *earthhome* of all creatures on our planet. The Creator is the Host, and humankind and all other species are guests, or at least strangers whom God has welcomed into finite existence to partake of and cultivate the gifts of the earth.

“In hospitality, we respond to the welcome that God has offered and (we) replicate that welcome in the world.”⁴³ The Creator has chosen humankind to be a genuine partner with a unique responsibility to help make and keep the earth hospitable and habitable for all peoples and our fellow creatures. Such responsibility requires humankind to create great space in our hearts, our inner houses, for other households, other peoples, other species, and the Ultimate Other, each one of whom bears visible

⁴¹ Pohl, *Living into Community*, location 4047.

⁴² *LS*, 67.

⁴³ Pohl, *Living into Community*, location 3857.

and invisible gifts, benefits, and challenges. Humankind positively or negatively responds to the call of the Creator-Host, who wishes to be freely welcomed in our hearts as both mysterious Guest and friendly Master.

CONCLUSION

For the evangelization of the family I propose the following: (1) specify the phrase “Gospel of the Family” into “Gospel of the Hospitable (or Welcoming) Family;” (2) include in the description of the vision and mission of Jesus his radical redefinition of his family in order to maintain the challenge of the Gospel in contexts in which people tend toward clannishness, tribalism, dynastic politics, or an idolatry of the family; (3) include in the reflection on the vocation and mission of the family the Christian practice of active and mutual hospitality in which the homeless, the vulnerable, the stranger, and the estranged are sought, welcomed, befriended, and considered bearers of visible and invisible gifts.

Dennis T. Gonzalez, SThD
St. Vincent School of Theology
dengon1964@yahoo.com