

The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

This issue of the Newsletter picks up from the issue one year ago, revisiting what the Pope has been doing with and to the Roman Catholic Church. The big event of the year was the first session of the Synod on the Family. A second session is to be held in October, 2015, so that the final document that was published after the two-week meeting does not contain anything fixed and permanent but is rather a report about what the bishops discussed. The expectations should not have been high from what Mary MacAleese, the former president of Ireland, described as “150 celibate males who had never changed a baby’s nappy trying to advise married people how to live their family lives.”

An interim report after the first week was heralded by the news media as “a revolution,” or “an earthquake.” That raised expectations about what the final report would say. That report at the end of the meeting was greeted as a “disappointment” or as a victory for reactionary forces. Perhaps Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Germany was accurate in describing the meeting as three steps forward and two steps backward.

Given that the preparatory paper for the meeting was disastrous, the result were surprisingly positive. People who thought that the Synod would reverse church doctrines were bound to be disappointed. What did happen was an unscripted conversation in which bishops raised any issue they wanted to, a far cry from any previous synod meeting in Rome. At the end of the meeting Pope Francis said that he would have been worried if there had been agreement and if a false unity was maintained for the sake of peace. He seems to want everything on the table.

In the following pages there are three essays.

1) Margaret Farley has a rather optimistic view of the bishops on sexuality. That is surprising because Farley’s book, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* was condemned by the Vatican (the effect of which was to immediately make the book the #1 best seller in the United States). She seems to think that it would not be a big step for the bishops to approve of gay marriage.

2) Ross Douthat has a skeptical attitude about everything that the pope has been doing, including the fact that the synod was a free-wheeling discussion of major changes in church thinking. Douthat has to be taken seriously because he occupies perhaps the most powerful platform of any Catholic in the country, the op-ed page of the *New York Times*.

3) The third essay by Gabriel Moran tracks small but significant changes in the way that the Pope speaks and in the language of the synod’s documents. He presents an argument about how the Catholic Church actually changes its teaching, a process neglected by almost all the news media.

LOVE SHAPED AND GROUNDED IN FAITH

By Margaret Farley,

In the many centuries of the development of Catholic sexual ethics, certain concerns have been central. The primary moral rule has been: "No sex outside of marriage." Sex is good, as early Christian writers insisted, since it is part of Creation, but they added, it is also disordered as a result of original sin. Hence, sex as an inordinate and powerful drive must be constrained and channeled. Moreover, it needs to be justified by an intention to procreate, and essential to that is gender complementarity between men and women.

For so long as the Catholic tradition considered sex as justified only when it is intended for the procreation of children and for so long as gender complementarity was seen as the only natural context for sex, there was, of course, no room for any positive valuation of homosexual relationships.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries those foundations of sexual ethics began to be questioned. New biblical, theological and historical studies of the roots of moral norms, new understanding of sexuality itself, and new shifts in economic and social life all underwent significant changes. The idea that the procreation of children is the sole justification of sexual activity is gone. The view of sexuality as fundamentally disordered is also pretty much gone from Catholic thought. Although moral theologians still underline the potential of sex for sinfulness, the preoccupation with its destructive power that used to dominate Catholic discussion of sex has been seriously modified.

Rigid stereotypes of male/female complementarity have also been softened: gender equality, the mutuality of sexual relationships, an appreciation of shared possibilities and responsibilities now appear in middle-of-the-road Catholic theologies of marriage and family, as well as in official church documents and papal teaching.

Yet older motifs of sex as uncontrollable and destructive, of the generation of children as being the primary purpose of sex, and of sharply drawn gender stereotypes continue to appear in Catholic discussions of same-sex relationships. It is as if the idea that sex is only justifiable when the purpose is the generation of children has been shelved when heterosexual relationships are at issue.

Sex is good in itself in loving heterosexual relations, but sex again becomes a thing of danger and disorder in gay and lesbian relationships. We are careful not to make sharp distinctions when we talk about the education of girls, career opportunities for women, and shared parenting, but fundamental gender difference suddenly reappears when critics take aim at an acceptance of same-sex relations.

But what is marriage that would seem to make it inappropriate for persons in same-sex partnerships? At the end of his study, *What is Marriage?* the theologian Theodore Mackin acknowledged that there is as yet no one agreed answer to that question. Many theologians see the consent of the partners in the form of a covenant or binding contract as the core reality of marriage and "marital" commitment as a special sort of covenant or

commitment. It includes a commitment to love and to accept being loved – with a love that is sexual but not only sexual. It is an exclusive commitment. And it is a commitment to a framework for loving and living, to a permanent blending of loves, a weaving of a fabric of life together that embraces both moments of powerful intensity and the “everydayness” of life.

A marital commitment is also a commitment to fruitfulness in love – marriage is not an egoism *à deux*. This fruitfulness can take many forms: the bearing and raising of children, of course, but not necessarily this, and certainly not only this. It might include caring for others’ children, the encouragement of the young, the promotion of justice, or the creation of beautiful things. And finally, a marital commitment includes a commitment to community – to family, friends, church, society, and if it is Christian, it is a commitment made individually and jointly to God.

Now what in this description of the core of marriage would not fit a same-sex relationship marked by the partners’ profound commitment to love, to share their whole selves, to be faithful to the uniqueness of their love, to be together fruitful in myriad ways, and to anchor their love and life in community? Ah, for critics there is still one stumbling block. They insist that there is one other element essential to the meaning of marriage: gender differentiation between spouses. Forms of marriage may change from era to era or from culture to culture; you might take away love; you might take away genuine choice; you might take away specific ceremonies; but there is one thing you can’t take away: marriage is always between a man and a woman.

But need this be so? Today the meanings of gender have become sufficiently problematized that gender difference cannot simply be assumed as central to marriage in the same way as it has in the past. Karl Rahner’s reflection on marriage gives us food for thought. Considering marriage as symbolic of the love between Christ and the church, as in Ephesians 5:29-33, “Husbands love your wives as Christ loves the church; and wives love your husbands as the church loves Christ,” Rahner observes that the point here is not the gender assignment of roles but the *unity* of the spouses.

For many, marriage is understood as between two persons, two equal persons. For each person, the gender of the other person matters. But for the institution and sacrament of marriage, it need not matter whether persons are gay or straight, marriage would still be as important as it is today. Indeed, it might finally be as important as it should be.

In the Catholic tradition we are formed in the belief that all of Creation is alive with God’s presence; and that Jesus Christ, God incarnate, came and is gone, but is with us still, and he will come again. We believe that particular human experiences are open to God’s self-revelation in remarkable ways as “sacraments.” The Catholic sensibility discerns the presence of God around and in and among us. We may interpret the sacrament of marriage in the light of these beliefs, and sense that same-sex marriages, for those called to them, are such experiences of the presence of God manifest not only to the partners in marriage but to the church and the world.

THE POPE AND THE PRECIPICE

By Ross Douthat

To grasp why events in Rome during October – publically feuding Cardinals, documents floated and then disavowed – were so remarkable in the context of modern Catholic history, it helps to understand certain practical aspects of papal infallibility. On paper, that doctrine seems to grant extraordinary power to the pope. The First Vatican Council declared in 1870 that that he cannot err when he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole church.

In practice, though, it places profound effective limits on his power. These limits are set, in part, by normal human modesty. “I am only infallible if I speak infallibly, but I shall never do that,” John XXIII is reported to have said. But there are also limits set by the binding power of existing teaching, which a pope cannot reverse or contradict without proving his own office, well, fallible, effectively dynamiting the very claim to authority on which his decisions rest.

In the last era of major church reform, the Second Vatican Council, the popes were not the intellectual protagonists, and the council’s debates, while vigorous, were steered toward a (pope approved) consensus. But something very different is happening under Pope Francis. In his public words and gestures, through the men he has elevated and the debates he has encouraged, the pope has repeatedly signaled a desire to rethink issues where Catholic teaching is in clear tension with Western social life – sex and marriage, divorce and homosexuality.

And in the synod on the family, the prelates in charge of the proceedings – men handpicked by the pontiff – formally proposed such a rethinking, issuing a document that suggested both a general shift in the church’s attitude toward nonmarital relationships and a specific change, admitting the divorced-and-remarried to communion, that conflict sharply with the church’s historic teaching on marriage’s indissolubility.

At which point there was a kind of chaos. Reports from inside the synod have a medieval feel – churchmen berating each other, accusations of manipulation, rebellions bubbling up. In the end the document’s controversial passages were substantially walked back. But even then, instead of a Vatican II-style consensus, the synod divided, with a large number voting against even watered-down language around divorce and homosexuality. Some of those votes may have been cast by disappointed progressives. The synod has to be interpreted as a rebuke of the implied papal position. The pope wishes to take steps, the synod managers suggested. But given what the church has always taught, many of the synod’s participants replied, he and we cannot.

Over all, that conservative reply has the better of the argument. Not necessarily on every issue. The church’s attitude toward gay Catholics, for instance, has often been far more punitive and hostile than the pastoral approach to heterosexuals living in what the church considers sinful situations, and there are clearly ways that the church can be more understanding of the cross carried by gay Christians.

HOW THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH CHANGES

By Gabriel Moran

For anyone interested in how large and old institutions change, the Roman Catholic Church is a fascinating case study. Changes in the church have often taken centuries to occur so that a generation of church leaders who insisted that the church would never change on a particular teaching are long gone when the change is finally effected. The problem in today's church is that the pace of change all around the church has accelerated and the church is open to scrutiny by invasive news media. As many politicians have sadly learned, don't say anything these days unless you can explain that clip on YouTube when you said some something different on another occasion.

Church officials tend to say "church" when they are actually talking about church officials and official doctrines of the church. The secular news media simply repeat that use of language. The equating of "church" with church officials would make any significant change a near impossibility. The *church's* teaching occurs as the people who make up the church change; bishops often have to catch up with the change. For example, the U.S. bishops' Pastoral Letter on Peace in the 1980s reflected what had already occurred throughout the U.S. church. Similarly, polls consistently show that more than 90% of Catholics use a means for controlling pregnancy; the bishops have to find a way to catch up.

The change in *official* teaching by church leaders occurs through seemingly small changes of language that eventually lead to obvious changes of rules and formulas of belief. Church officials never say that the church has been wrong in the past; instead, the ambiguities of language and the long history of the church allow officials to emphasize something different from the past to the point of saying *nearly* the opposite. The process may seem disingenuous and sometimes it is; but it is the way that the church can change while maintaining continuity with the past. The small changes of language have to be preceded and accompanied by nonverbal changes.

Here is where the pope has extraordinary power in the present configuration of the Roman Catholic Church. No one else in the world has his power which is both good and bad news. No one should have the power that the pope has but if he uses it well he can begin to reconstruct the whole institution. That is, this pope's paradoxical task is to de-absolutize the papacy, to resituate the bishop of Rome in a true episcopal college.

The title of pope should be retained for continuity with the tradition. The pope's role as bishop of the diocese of Rome should differ in an important respect from all the other bishops. To use a secular comparison, the pope should become head of state (not the Vatican state but the Roman Catholic state) instead of head of government. The present pope is well suited to play a part similar to that of presidents of Ireland or Germany, who speak for the people and are not involved in the mechanics of government. The pope could finally be said to serve the people who make up the church.

Can the pope pull off such a change? Probably not but he has already taken steps in that direction. The pope has been very aware of gestures to de-absolutize the papacy; each gesture may seem small but together they have closed much of the gap separating the papacy from the other bishops and from other church members. Some of the pope's comments suggest that he sees his role as similar to Pope John XXIII: give it your best shot for a few years before you die or resign. The best thing that the previous pope did was establish a precedent for papal retirement. Monarchs are for life; a head of state should have an appointment of about ten years with no second term. Other bishops should resign by the age of 70 or 75. The *minimum* age of the pope should be 70 to 75.

The key organizational move was to have a first meeting of a body called a synod. What this un-representative council of the church has to say is not that important. A more representative meeting next year will not solve any big problems either. But perhaps there will be a third session and after that the emergence of a true ecumenical council of men and women to be the worldwide authority of the church. Would that still be the Catholic Church? It would be very different from the present version of church but it would certainly be more catholic (universal). There would still be a pope but one more representative of the tradition than a church with the monarchical pope created in 1870.

The secular world as well as many Catholics and former Catholics are hoping that the pope is going to announce a reversal of some official doctrines. That is not going to happen and it would not work. In 1968, Pope Paul VI published an encyclical (*Humani Vitae*) on the control of pregnancy. He had appointed a small committee that had worked remarkably well. But for whatever reason, the pope rejected their conclusion, published his own uninformed view, and split the church. The reform of the Roman Catholic Church that had been given a big lift by the Second Vatican Council was aborted.

When Pope Francis was asked his view of that encyclical he said it was not a matter of changing the doctrine but of deepening the understanding of it. A nice non-answer. The synod followed the pope's lead in saying "we should return to the message of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* which highlights the need to respect the dignity of the person in the moral evaluating of the methods of regulating birth." That is one of the most creative re-reading of a document I have ever seen.

The process of change in official doctrines can be glimpsed in the synod's approach to two questions that dominated the synod meeting: divorce and homosexuality. They did not find a way out of their own cul-de-sacs on the two issues but their language – often inadvertent changes in language – began preparing for changes in official teaching. The process may take years or decades, but it might be much faster than ever before. In the United States, the shift in the public attitude toward gay marriage has been breathtakingly fast. No one could have predicted the pace of change. The official church teaching will be nowhere as quick but it would have been unthinkable a few years ago that bishops would be seriously discussing the topic.

The pope had responded to questions about homosexuality with rhetorical questions. His responses were celebrated for being non-judgmental. The more significant thing was that

he used the English word “gay” in his responses. The news media did not notice the surprising use of the word. *Time* magazine, in its choosing the pope as “person of the year” even misquoted him by replacing the word gay in his response with the word homosexual. Ten seconds on google could have corrected *Time*’s sloppy journalism.

On the question of homosexuality the two most important points in the synod’s document were completely missed by the news media. One use of language showed that the bishops were still stuck with inadequate language from the past; the other use of language was a significant breakthrough which the bishops might not have been aware they were making.

The news media consistently reported on what the synod documents say about gay and lesbian people. Unfortunately, that is not the way that the bishops spoke. The synod continued to speak in line with official teaching that has referred to “the homosexual.” Used as a noun, “homosexual” was from the beginning and to this day a reference to a species apart, a strange group unlike “us.” (On statistical grounds alone, one must presume that some of the bishops are gay). As an adjective, “homosexual” refers to one aspect of a person’s life. But the more ordinary term these days is gay or lesbian; it took a while for “straight” people to become comfortable with these terms but allowing people to describe themselves is a crucial step in their full public acknowledgment.

The good news in the synod’s discussion of “the homosexual” was its use of the term “sexual orientation.” The synod was criticized for not saying anything new on the subject. Even the editorial in *Commonweal* said that the final document had just one paragraph “repeating Vatican statements on homosexual orientation.” But the Vatican has never accepted a positive or even neutral meaning of “sexual orientation.” The 1975 document (“Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics”) acknowledged that there are “true homosexuals” but quickly added that the condition of such people is a pathological disorder. In its 1986 document (“On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons”) “sexual orientation” is opposed by the Catholic Church because, it is claimed to be, reductive of the homosexual’s freedom and dignity.

The reason for not accepting “sexual orientation” is pretty simple. Once it is accepted that some people are oriented “by nature” to same-sex love, then homosexuality cannot be dismissed or condemned as “an objective disorder.” And if that is the way people are, then according to the Catholic Church’s sacramental principle, the expression of their God-given nature cannot be condemned as sinful. In the U.S. bishops’ “Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination” the term “inclination” may seem like a synonym for orientation but it is not. The “inclination” is to actually behave homosexually which is still condemned as sinful. The main advice given to people who have homosexual inclinations is not to spend too much time with people who have like inclinations.

The synod did not change any official positions on gay and lesbian sexuality. In practice there has slowly been a change of attitude over the years toward gay and lesbian people. It was, however, a welcome change for the synod to say that there should be a welcoming of homosexual people in parishes. The final statement was not as positive but it was still a big step beyond guidelines for ministering to people who are sick and/or sinful. The

synod was obviously not going to endorse same-sex marriage but concerning unions or partnerships the bishops actually discussed some positive contributions of such unions.

The other big topic of the synod was divorced-remarried Catholics. The entry point of discussion was the reception of communion by people in that situation. Like gay marriage, which depends upon acceptance of gay sexuality, communion for divorce-remarried Catholic presupposes a prior answer to the issue of divorce. Reception of communion is an intramural question that has been largely solved in practice. But communion by divorced-remarried Catholics raises the issue of official teaching on the indissolubility of marriage. Roman Catholic Church officials have continued to insist on this doctrine even while it is obvious that some marriages never worked and others have died out. How does the church reconcile its doctrine and practice?

The main way in which “Catholic divorce” happens is by “annulment” which regularly uses the fiction that a marriage never existed. An elaborate and slow-moving bureaucracy hides what is being admitted, namely, that divorce sometimes makes sense. People can sometimes spend years and much money getting the Vatican to declare an annulment. At the synod there was widespread agreement that the annulment process should be simplified. What could be a revolutionary change was not noticed in news reports. The local bishop would be able to declare annulments. In a short time that could mean the dismantling of the entire bureaucracy in Rome with the result that the Roman Catholic Church would more obviously admit that some marriages prove not to be permanent.

It would be a shame if the church simply backed into this admission instead of rethinking its outlook on marriage. The Catholic Church could be the right institution for affirming that permanence is something that is grown into. Especially for the 50% of marriages that involve children, permanence should still be held up as the ideal. But no matter how well-intentioned and sincere they are, two twenty-year olds cannot be certain about their lives in the future. Marriage could be thought of as a series of commitments lasting one, three, five, or ten years. On their fiftieth anniversary most couples can realistically be certain that their marriage is permanent. This proposal is in line with Catholic tradition that had stages of courtship and engagement before the promise of permanence. In today’s world there has to be an extension well beyond teenage years or even beyond the twenties for permanence to fully take hold.

The Catholic Church has a model for marriage in the way it now looks at the vows of people in religious orders. A nun or a monk takes a series of temporary vows before making permanent vows at about age 25. The Catholic Church has had to face the fact that a large percentage of people who make such a promise in their 20’s discover that they are not suited for the life. The Vatican has speeded up the recognition of this fact and grants “dispensations” from vows. This development suggests a different kind of organization in which the usual expectation would be that young people would stay for one, two or five years and then move into another stage of their lives. A small percentage of people would grow into being permanent members. Unfortunately, the collapse of the present religious orders make that development unlikely but no one knows what might emerge from those collapsed structures.