

Chapter 11

Accompaniment

Many Christians suffer in ways that leave them feeling lost and unsure of God's love. They suffer doubt about the faith and disappointment with those who profess it. They suffer pain and guilt as a result of experiences they have had and mistakes they have made. They suffer uncertainty about their lives and confusion about God's will. How well is the church ministering to those who walk through these dark valleys? How well is it communicating God's constant love and acceptance?

In far too many cases, unfortunately, either not well enough or not well at all. Numerous Christians recount experiences of pastoral ministry that are either unhelpful or a source of added suffering in their own right. Those who find themselves at some distance from a conventionally faithful Christian life especially suffer criticism and misunderstanding and, in the worst cases, outright exclusion and condemnation. The spiritually wounded who look to the church for comfort and support too often are either left untreated or wounded further.

The missionary renewal of the church demands attention to these pastoral failings, for they are ultimately failings of faithful witness and proclamation. Pope Francis, consequently, calls upon all Christians, and especially pastoral workers, to learn to see God's presence in the lives of those with serious doubts, sins, struggles, or differences with the church. Those who suffer need to be accompanied in their trials and helped to grow closer to God without ever having their dignity denied or their freedom usurped. This means that those who minister need to think and act and especially speak with greater tenderness and mercy. It also means fostering within the church a wider culture of welcome so that all people can find within it a home and a help for their hurt. Only in this way will the church demonstrate to the world that the gospel is truly good news for everyone.

WALKING WITH THOSE WHO HAVE LEFT

We need a church "capable of warming people's hearts, of walking with them in the night, of dialoguing with their hopes and disappointments, of mending their brokenness."¹

We have labored greatly and, at times, we see what appear to be failures. We feel like those who must tally up a losing season as we consider those who have left us or no longer consider us credible or relevant.

Let us read once again, in this light, the story of Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13-15). The two disciples have left Jerusalem. They are leaving behind the "nakedness" of God. They are scandalized by the failure of the Messiah in whom they had hoped and who now appeared utterly vanquished, humiliated, even after the third day (vv. 17-21). Here we have to face the difficult mystery of those people who leave the church, who, under the illusion of alternative ideas, now think that the church—their Jerusalem—can no longer offer them anything meaningful and important. So they set off on the road alone, with their disappointment. Perhaps the church appeared too weak, perhaps too distant from their needs, perhaps too poor to respond to their concerns, perhaps too cold, perhaps too caught up with itself, perhaps a prisoner of its own rigid formulas; perhaps the world seems to have made the church a relic of the past, unfit for new questions; perhaps the church could speak to people in their infancy but not to those come of age (cf. *Aparecida Document 225*). It is a fact that nowadays there are many people like the two disciples of Emmaus, not only those looking for answers in the new religious groups that are sprouting up, but also those who already seem godless, both in theory and in practice.

¹ Meeting with the Bishops of Brazil, July 28, 2013.

Faced with this situation, what are we to do? We need a church unafraid of going forth into their night. We need a church capable of meeting them on their way. We need a church capable of entering into their conversation. We need a church able to dialogue with those disciples who, having left Jerusalem behind, are wandering aimlessly, alone, with their own disappointment, disillusioned by a Christianity now considered barren, fruitless soil, incapable of generating meaning.

A relentless process of globalization, an often-uncontrolled process of intense urbanization, has promised great things. Many people have been captivated by their potential, which of course contains positive elements as, for example, the shortening of distance, the drawing closer of peoples and cultures, the diffusion of information and of services. On the other hand, however, many are living the negative effects of these realities without realizing how they affect a proper vision of man and of the world. This generates enormous confusion and an emptiness that people are unable to explain, regarding the purpose of life, personal disintegration, the loss of the experience of belonging to a "home" and the absence of personal space and strong personal ties. And since there is no one to accompany them or to show them with his or her own life the true way, many have sought shortcuts, because the standards set by Mother Church seem to be asking too much. There are also those who recognize the ideal of man and of life as proposed by the church, but they do not have the audacity to embrace it. They think that this ideal is too lofty for them, that it is beyond their abilities, and that the goal the church sets is unattainable. Nonetheless they cannot live without having at least something, even a poor imitation of what seems too grand and distant. With disappointed hearts they then go off in search of something that will lead them even further astray, or that brings them to a partial belonging that, ultimately, does not fulfill their lives.

The great sense of abandonment and solitude, of not even belonging to oneself, that often results from this situation, is too painful to hide. Some kind of release is necessary. There is always the option of complaining. But even complaint acts like a boomerang; it comes back and ends up increasing one's unhappiness. Few people are still capable of hearing the voice of pain; the best we can do is to anesthetize it.

From this point of view we need a church capable of walking at people's side, of doing more than simply listening to them; a church that accompanies them on their journey; a church able to make sense of the "night" contained in the flight of so many of our brothers and sisters from Jerusalem; a church that realizes that the reasons why people leave also contain reasons why they can eventually return. But we need to know how to interpret, with courage, the larger picture. Jesus warmed the hearts of the disciples of Emmaus.

I would like all of us to ask ourselves today: Are we still a church capable of warming hearts? A church capable of leading people back to Jerusalem? Of bringing them home? Jerusalem is where our roots are: scripture, catechesis, sacraments, community, friendship with the Lord, Mary, and the apostles . . . Are we still able to speak of these roots in a way that will revive a sense of wonder at their beauty? Many people have left because they were promised something more lofty, more powerful, and faster. But what is more lofty than the love revealed in Jerusalem? Nothing is more lofty than the abasement of the cross, since there we truly approach the height of love! Are we still capable of demonstrating this truth to those who think that the apex of life is to be found elsewhere? Do we know anything more powerful than the strength hidden within the weakness of love, goodness, truth, and beauty?

People today are attracted by things that are faster and faster: rapid Internet connections, speedy cars and planes, instant relationships. But at the same time we see a desperate need for calmness, I would even say slowness. Is the church still able to move slowly—to take the time to listen, to have the patience to mend and reassemble? Or is the church herself caught up in the frantic pursuit of efficiency? Dear brothers, let us recover the calm to be able to walk at the same pace as our pilgrims, keeping alongside them, remaining close to them, enabling them to speak of the disappointments present in their hearts and to let us address them. They want to forget Jerusalem, where they have their sources, but eventually they will experience thirst. We need a church capable of accompanying them on the road back to Jerusalem! A church capable of helping them to rediscover the glorious and joyful things that are spoken of Jerusalem, and to understand that she is my mother, our mother, and that we are not orphans! We were born in her. Where is our Jerusalem? Where were we born? In baptism, in the first encounter of love, in our calling, in vocation (cf. *ibid.*, 226).

We need a church that kindles hearts and warms them. We need a church capable of restoring citizenship to her many children who are journeying, as it were, in an exodus. It isn't true that God's presence has been dimmed in them. Let us learn to look at things more deeply. What is missing is someone to warm their heart, as was the case with the disciples of Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:32).²

THE MERCIFUL MOTHER

In pastoral ministry the church must be close to people, heal wounds, and express the tenderness of God. Pastors must "overcome the temptation of aloofness"³ and accompany people in all of their experiences, like a loving mother.

How are we treating the people of God? I dream of a church that is a mother and shepherdess. The church's ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans, and raises up his neighbor. This is pure gospel. God is greater than sin. The structural and organizational reforms are secondary that is, they come afterward. The first reform must be the attitude. The ministers of the gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people's night, into the darkness, but without getting lost. The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials. The bishops, particularly, must be able to support the movements of God among their people with patience, so that no one is left behind.⁴

Among the images that the Second Vatican Council chose to help us understand the nature of the church better, there is that of "mother": the church is our mother in faith, in supernatural life (cf. Lumen Gentium 6, 14, 15, 41, 42). It is one of the images most used by the fathers of the church in the first centuries and I think it could be useful for us too. For me it is one of the most beautiful images of the church: Mother Church! In what sense and in what way is the church mother? We start with the human reality of motherhood: what makes a mother?

First of all a mother generates life; she carries her child in her womb for nine months and then delivers him to life, giving birth to him. The church is like this: she bears us in the faith, through the work of the Holy Spirit ...since the faith is a gift, it is a gift from God given to us in the church and through the church. And the church gives us the life of faith in baptism; that is the moment she gives birth to us as children of God, the moment she gives us the life of God, she engenders us as a mother would.

A mother does not stop at just giving life; with great care she helps her children grow, gives them milk, feeds them, teaches them the way of life, accompanies them always with her care, with her affection, with her love, even when they are grown up.⁵

When a child grows up, becomes an adult, he chooses his path, assumes his responsibilities, stands on his own two feet, does what he likes, and at times he can also go off course, some accident occurs. A mother has the patience to continue to accompany her children, always and in every situation. It is the force of her love that impels her; a mother can follow her children on their way with discretion and tenderness and, even when they go astray, always finds a way to understand them, to be close, to help.

We—in my region—say that a mother can *dar la cara*. What does this mean? It means that a mother can "stand up" for her children, in other words she is always motivated to defend them. I am thinking of the mother who suffer for their children in prison or in difficult situations; they do not question whether or not their children are guilty, they keep on loving them. Mothers often suffer humiliation, but they are not afraid, they never cease to give of themselves.

² Meeting with the Bishops of Brazil, July 28, 2013.

³ Meeting with the Bishops of Mexico, February 13, 2016.

⁴ Interview with Pope Francis, September 21, 2013.

⁵ General Audience, September 11, 2013.

This is how the church is. She is a merciful mother who understands, who has always sought to help and encourage even those of her children who have erred or are erring; she never closes the door to home. She does not judge but offers God's forgiveness, she offers his love, which invites even those of her children who have fallen into a deep abyss to continue on their way. The church is not afraid to enter their darkness to give them hope; nor is the church afraid to enter our darkness when we are in the dark night of our soul and our conscience to give us hope!⁶

This is the church we all love, this is the church I love: a mother who has the good of her children at heart and who is able to give her life for them. We must not forget, however, that the church is not only the priests, or we bishops, no, she is all of us! . . . All who are baptized, men and women, together we are the church. So often in our life we do not bear witness of this motherhood of the church, of this maternal courage of the church! So often we are cowards!⁷

"Pastoral care" is nothing other than the exercise of the church's motherhood. She gives birth, suckles, gives growth, corrects, nourishes, and leads by the hand. ... So we need a church capable of rediscovering the maternal womb of mercy. Without mercy we have little chance nowadays of becoming part of a world of "wounded" persons in need of understanding, forgiveness, love.⁸

Mercy is the very foundation of the church's life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love. .. Perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy. The temptation, on the one hand, to focus exclusively on justice made us forget that this is only the first, albeit necessary and indispensable step. But the church needs to go beyond and strive for a higher and more important goal.⁹

Only a church able to shelter the faces of men and women who knock on her doors will be able to speak to them of God. If we do not know how to decipher their sufferings, if we do not come to understand their needs, then we can offer them nothing.¹⁰

The church is a mother; she has to go out to heal those who are hurting, with mercy. If the Lord never tires of forgiving, we have no other choice than this: first of all, to care for those who are hurting. The church is a mother, and she must travel this path of mercy. And find a form of mercy for all.¹¹

ACCOMPANYING STAGES OF GROWTH

Accompaniment seeks to lead people ever closer to God by patiently guiding them along their path of spiritual maturation-and "without taking over their conscience."¹²

Although she constantly holds up the call to perfection and asks for a fuller response to God, "the church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children ... by restoring in them hope and confidence, like the 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 midst of a storm" (*Relatio Synodi* 2014, 28). Let us not forget that the church's task is often like that of a field hospital.¹³

⁶ General Audience, September 18, 2013.

⁷ General Audience, September 3, 2014.

⁸ Meeting with the Bishops of Brazil, July 28, 2013.

⁹ *Misericordiae Vultus* 10.

¹⁰ Meeting with the Bishops of Mexico, February 13, 2016.

¹¹ In-flight Press Conference during the Return Flight, July 28, 2013.

¹² Address to the International Conference on Pastoral Work for Vocations, October 21, 2016.

¹³ *Amoris Laetitia* 291.

We are part of a wounded humanity-and we must be honest in saying this-in which all of the educational institutions, especially the most important one, the family, are experiencing grave difficulties almost everywhere in the world. Men and women today experience serious identity problems and have difficulty making proper choices; as a result, they tend to be conditioned and to delegate important decisions about their own lives to others. We need to resist the temptation of usurping individual freedom, of directing them without allowing for their growth in genuine maturity. Every person has his or her own time, his or her own path, and we must accompany this journey. Moral or spiritual progress that manipulates a person's immaturity is only an apparent success, and one destined to fail. It is better to achieve less and move forward without seeking attention. Christian education, rather, requires a patient accompaniment that is capable of waiting for the right moment for each person, as the Lord does with each one of us. The Lord is patient with us!¹⁴

No one is more patient than God our Father. . . . No one is more understanding and willing to wait. He always invites us to take a step forward but does not demand a full response if we are not yet ready. He simply asks that we sincerely look at our life and present ourselves honestly before him, and that we be willing to continue to grow, asking from him what we ourselves cannot as yet achieve.¹⁵

A small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life that appears outwardly in order but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties.¹⁶

I was very pleased once: a man who went to confession was in a situation where he couldn't receive absolution. He had gone with a certain apprehension, because he had been sent away several times before: "No, no, go away." The priest listened to him, explained the man's situation, and told him: "But you keep praying. God loves you. I will give you my blessing. Do you promise to come back?" This priest "wasted time" in order to draw that man toward the sacraments. . . . Accompaniment is one of the most important attitudes, being ready to accompany people's growth in faith.¹⁷

Today more than ever we need men and women who, on the basis of their experience of accompanying others, are familiar with processes that call for prudence, understanding, patience and docility to the Spirit, so that they can protect the sheep from wolves who would scatter the flock. We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart that makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word that shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God's love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives.

But this always demands the patience of one who knows full well what Saint Thomas Aquinas tells us: that anyone can have grace and charity, and yet falter in the exercise of the virtues because of persistent "contrary inclinations" (S. *Th.*, I-II, q. 65, a. 3, ad 2). In other words, the organic unity of the virtues always and necessarily exists *in habitu*, even though forms of conditioning can hinder the operations of those virtuous habits. Hence the need for "a pedagogy that will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery" (John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* 20). Reaching a level of maturity where individuals can make truly free and responsible decisions calls for much time and patience. As Blessed Peter Faber used to say: "Time is God's messenger."¹⁸

¹⁴ Address to the Third World Congress of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities, November 22, 2014.

¹⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium* 153.

¹⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium* 44.

¹⁷ Meeting with the Polish Bishops, July 27, 2016.

¹⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium* 171.

Along these lines, Saint John Paul II proposed the so-called "law of gradualness" in the knowledge that the human being "knows, loves, and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth" (*Familiaris Con- sortia* 34). This is not a "gradualness of law" but rather a gradualness in the prudential exercise of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law. For the law is itself a gift of God that points out the way, a gift for everyone without exception; it can be followed with the help of grace, even though each human being "advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God and the demands of God's definitive and absolute love in his or her entire personal and social life" (ibid., 9).¹⁹

This does not mean throwing out the baby with the bath water, no, no.... It is ... an act that leaves room for the conversion of the other.²⁰

In order to avoid all misunderstanding, I would point out that in no way must the church desist from proposing the full ideal God's plan in all its grandeur.... A lukewarm attitude, any kind of relativism, or an undue reticence in proposing that ideal, would be a lack of fidelity to the gospel and also of love on the part of the church.... To show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being.... At the same time, from our awareness of the weight of mitigating circumstances – psychological, historical, and even biological – it follows that "without detracting from the evangelical ideal, there is a need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear," making room for "the Lord's mercy, which spurs us on to do our best" (*Evangelii Gaudium* 44).

I understand those who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care that leaves no room for confusion. But I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a church attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit shows in the midst of human weakness, a mother who, while clearly expressing her objective teaching, "always does what good she can, even if in the process, her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street" (ibid., 45).²¹

We see then that the task of evangelization operates within the limits of language and of circumstances. It constantly seeks to communicate more effectively the truth of the gospel in a specific context, without renouncing the truth, the goodness, and the light that it can bring whenever perfection is not possible. A missionary heart is aware of these limits and makes itself "weak with the weak...everything for everyone" (1 Cor 9:22). It never closes itself off, never retreats into its own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness.²²

An evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be. It is familiar with patient expectation and apostolic endurance. Evangelization consists mostly of patience and disregard for constraints of time. Faithful to the Lord's gift, it also bears fruit. An evangelizing community is always concerned with fruit, because the Lord wants her to be fruitful. It cares for the grain, and does not grow impatient at the weeds. The sower, when he sees weeds sprouting among the grain does not grumble or overreact. He or she finds a way to let the word take flesh in a particular situation and bear fruits of new life, however imperfect or incomplete these may appear.²³

¹⁹ *Amoris Laetitia* 295.

²⁰ Address to the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Rome, June 16, 2016.

²¹ *Amoris Laetitia* 307-8.

²² *Evangelii Gaudium* 45.

²³ *Evangelii Gaudium* 24.

THE TASK OF PASTORAL DISCERNMENT

Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God."²⁴

You have heard, as have I, many people who say: "No, I never go [to confession], because I went once, and the priest lambasted me, he really scolded me."²⁵

In a culture paradoxically suffering from anonymity and at the same time obsessed with the details of other people's lives, shamelessly given over to morbid curiosity, the church must look more closely and sympathetically at others whenever necessary.²⁶

This is how Jesus looked at Matthew This "publican" did not feel a look of contempt or judgment upon him, but felt he was looked into with love. Jesus challenged people's prejudices and labels; he created an open space in which Matthew was able to reexamine his life and embark on a new path.

This is how I like to think of the style of pastoral ministry. And, if I may, at the same time I imagine the gaze of each pastor: attentive, not hurried, able to stop and look deeply, to enter the life of another without ever making him feel threatened or judged... . It is a look of discernment, which accompanies people, without taking over their conscience, and without pretending to control the grace of God.²⁷

I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person's life. God is in everyone's life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs, or anything else-God is in this person's life. You can, you must try to seek God in every human life. Although the life of a person is a land full of thorns and weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow. You have to trust God.²⁸

God's presence accompanies the sincere efforts of individuals and groups to find encouragement and meaning in their lives. He dwells among them, fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness, truth, and justice. This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered. God does not hide himself from those who seek him with a sincere heart, even though they do so tentatively, in a vague and haphazard manner.²⁹

We must strive to grow in incarnate and inclusive discernment that dialogues with the consciences of the faithful, which are to be formed and not replaced (cf. *Amoris Laetitia* 37) in a patient and courageous process of accompaniment, so as to mature the capacity of each one-the faithful, families, priests, communities, and societies-all [are] called to advance in the freedom to choose and accomplish the good that God wills. Indeed, the activity of discernment is not reserved to the wise, the perspicacious, and the perfect. Rather, God often resists the proud and reveals himself to the humble (cf. Mt 11:25)

Therefore, authentic discernment, although definitive at each step, is always an open and necessary process that can be completed and enriched. It is not to be reduced to the repetition of formulas that "like lofty clouds bring little rain" to actual men and women, [who] are often immersed in a reality that cannot be reduced to black and white. The shepherd is called to make available to the flock the grace of the Spirit, who knows how to pierce the folds of reality and to take account of its nuances to reveal what God wishes to achieve at each moment.³⁰

²⁴ *Amoris Laetitia* 305.

²⁵ Meeting with the Missionaries of Mercy, February 9, 2016.

²⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium* 169.

²⁷ Address to the International Conference on Pastoral Work for Vocations, October 21, 2016.

²⁸ Interview with Pope Francis, September 21, 2013.

²⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium* 71.

³⁰ Address to the Bishops Ordained over the Past Year, September 14, 2017.

One who accompanies others has to realize that each person's situation before God and their life in grace are mysteries that no one can fully know from without. The Gospel tells us to correct others and to help them to grow on the basis of a recognition of the objective evil of their actions (cf. Mt 18:15), but without making judgments about their responsibility and culpability (cf. Mt 7:1; Lk 6:37). Someone good at such accompaniment does not give in to frustrations or fears. He or she invites others to let themselves be healed, to take up their mat, embrace the cross, leave all behind, and go forth ever anew to proclaim the gospel. Our personal experience of being accompanied and assisted, and of openness to those who accompany us, will teach us to be patient and compassionate with others and to find the right way to gain their trust, their openness, and their readiness to grow.³¹

We have to remember each of us carries the richness and the burdens of our personal history; this is what makes us different from everyone else. Our life, with its joys and sorrows, is something unique and unrepeatable that takes place under the merciful gaze of God. This demands, especially of priests, a careful, profound, and farsighted spiritual discernment, so that everyone, none excluded, no matter the situation a person is living in, can feel accepted by God, participate actively in the life of the community, and be part of that people of God which journeys tirelessly toward the fullness of his kingdom of justice, love, forgiveness, and mercy.³²

It often happens that we priests hear our faithful telling us they have encountered a very "strict" priest in the confessional, or [a] very "generous" [one], that is, a *rigorist* or a *laxist*. And this is not good. It is normal that there be differences in the style of confessors, but these differences cannot regard the essential, that is, sound moral doctrine and mercy. Neither the laxist nor the rigorist bears witness to Jesus Christ, for neither the one nor the other takes care of the person he encounters. The rigorist washes his hands of them; in fact, he nails the person to the law, understood in a cold and rigid way. And the laxist also washes his hands of them; he is only apparently merciful, but in reality he does not take seriously the problems of that conscience, by minimizing the sin. True mercy *takes the person into one's care*, listens to him attentively, approaches the situation with respect and truth, and accompanies him on the journey of reconciliation.... *Neither laxity nor rigorism foster holiness* and they do not sanctify the faithful! However, mercy accompanies the journey of holiness; it accompanies it and makes it grow.³³

Pastors and the lay faithful who accompany their brothers and sisters in faith or on a journey of openness to God must always remember what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches quite clearly: "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" (1735).³⁴

For this reason, a negative judgment about an objective situation does not imply a judgment about the imputability or culpability of the person involved

Recognizing the influence of such concrete factors, we can add that individual conscience needs to be better incorporated into the church's praxis. . . . Naturally, every effort should be made to encourage the development of an enlightened conscience, formed and guided by the responsible and serious discernment of one's pastor, and to encourage an ever-greater trust in God's grace. Yet conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response that can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal. ...

³¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* 172.

³² *Misericordia et Misera* 14.

³³ Address to the Parish Priests of the Diocese of Rome, March 6, 2014.

³⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium* 44.

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. . . . For this reason, 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. This would bespeak the closed heart of one used to hiding behind the church's teachings, "sitting on the chair of Moses and judging at times with superiority and superficiality difficult cases and wounded families" (Conclusion of the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, October 24, 2015)...Because of forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, it is possible that in an objective situation of sin-which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such-a person can be living in God's grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the church's help to this end.³⁵

In certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments. Hence, "I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber, but rather an encounter with the Lord's mercy" (*Evangelii Gaudium* 44). I would also point out that the Eucharist "is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak" (ibid., 47).³⁶

We cannot run the risk that a penitent not perceive the maternal presence of the church, which welcomes and loves each one.³⁷

The church will have to initiate everyone-priests, religious, and laity-into this "art of accompaniment" that teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze, which also heals, liberates, and encourages growth in the Christian life.³⁸

THE GOSPEL OF THE MARGINALIZED

"The joy of the gospel is for all people; no one can be excluded."³⁹ The church is called to be "the home where the doors are always open ... because everyone finds a welcome and is able to breathe in love and hope."⁴⁰

Last year I received a letter from a Spanish man who told me his story from the time when he was a child. He was born a female, a girl, and he suffered greatly because he felt that he was a boy but physically was a girl. He told his mother, when he was in his twenties, at twenty-two, that he wanted to have an operation and so forth. His mother asked him not to do so as long as she was alive. She was elderly, and died soon after. He had the operation.... Then he got married. And, in the neighborhood, where he lived there was an elderly priest, over eighty years old, the former parish priest. Then a new parish priest came. When the new priest would see him, he would yell at him from the sidewalk: "You'll go to hell!" When he went to the old priest, the old priest said to him: "How long has it been since you made your confession? Come now, I will hear your confession so you can receive communion."⁴¹

We need to proclaim the gospel on every street corner, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing, even with our preaching, every kind of disease and wound. In Buenos Aires I used to receive letters from homosexual persons who are "socially wounded" because they tell me that they feel the church has always condemned them. But the church does not want to do this.⁴²

³⁵ *Amoris Laetitia* 302-5.

³⁶ *Amoris Laetitia*, footnote 351.

³⁷ Meeting with the Missionaries of Mercy, February 9, 2016.

³⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium* 169.

³⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium* 23.

⁴⁰ Address to the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, October 14, 2013

⁴¹ In-flight Press Conference from Azerbaijan to Rome, October 2, 2016.

⁴² Interview with Pope Francis, September 21, 2013.

The Lord asks us above all *not to judge* and *not to condemn*. If anyone wishes to avoid God's judgment, he should not make himself the judge of his brother or sister.⁴³

We can and we must judge situations of sin—such as violence, corruption, and exploitation—but we may not judge individuals, since only God can see into the depths of their hearts.⁴⁴

If someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has good will, then who am I to judge him? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains this in a beautiful way, saying, ... "No one should marginalize these people for this, they must be integrated into society." ... We must be brothers and sisters to one another.⁴⁵

When a person who has this condition comes before Jesus, Jesus certainly does not say: "Go away because you are homosexual."⁴⁶

Moses, in his legislation regarding lepers, says that they are to be kept alone and apart from the community for the duration of their illness. He declares them "unclean!" (cf. Lev 13:1-2, 45-46). Imagine how much suffering and shame lepers must have felt: physically, socially, psychologically, and spiritually! They are not only victims of disease, but they feel guilty about it, punished for their sins! Theirs is a living death; they are like someone whose father has spit in his face (cf. Num 12:14). In addition, lepers inspire fear, contempt, and loathing, and so they are abandoned by their families, shunned by other persons, cast out by society. Indeed, society rejects them and forces them to live apart from the healthy. It excludes them. So much so that if a healthy person approached a leper, he would be punished severely, and often be treated as a leper himself. True, the purpose of this rule was "to safeguard the healthy," "to protect the righteous," and, in order to guard them from any risk, to eliminate "the peril" by treating the diseased person harshly....

Jesus revolutionizes and upsets that fearful, narrow, and prejudiced mentality. He does not abolish the law of Moses, but rather brings it to fulfillment (cf. Mt 5:17) ... Jesus, the new Moses, wanted to heal the leper. He wanted to touch him and restore him to the community without being "hemmed in" by prejudice, conformity to the prevailing mindset, or worry about becoming infected... For Jesus, what matters above all is reaching out to save those far off, healing the wounds of the sick, restoring everyone to God's family! And this is scandalous to some people!

Jesus is not afraid of this kind of scandal! He wanted to reinstate the outcast, to save those outside the camp (cf. Jn 10) In healing the leper, Jesus does not harm the healthy. Rather, he frees them from fear. He does not endanger them but gives them a brother. He does not devalue the law but instead values those for whom God gave the law This is the "logic," the mind of Jesus, and this is the way of the church. Not only to welcome and reinstate with evangelical courage all those who knock at our door, but to go out and seek, fearlessly and without prejudice, those who are distant, freely sharing what we ourselves freely received

I urge you to serve Jesus crucified in every person who is marginalized, for whatever reason; to see the Lord in every excluded person who is hungry, thirsty, naked; to see the Lord present even in those who have lost their faith, or turned away from the practice of their faith, or say that they are atheists; to see the Lord who is imprisoned, sick, unemployed, persecuted; to see the Lord in the leper—whether in body or soul—who encounters discrimination! We will not find the Lord unless we truly accept the marginalized! May we always have before us the image of Saint Francis, who was unafraid to embrace the leper and to accept every kind of outcast. Truly, dear brothers, the gospel of the marginalized is where our credibility is at stake, is discovered and is revealed!⁴⁷

The salvation that God has wrought, and the church joyfully proclaims, is for everyone (cf. *Propositio 6; Gaudium et Spes 22*) Jesus did not tell the apostles to form an exclusive and elite group. He said: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19).⁴⁸

⁴³ *Misericordiae Vultus* 14.

⁴⁴ Message for the 50th World Communications Day, January 24, 2016.

⁴⁵ In-flight Press Conference during the Return Flight, July 28, 2013.

⁴⁶ In-flight Press Conference from Azerbaijan to Rome, October 2, 2016.

⁴⁷ Homily, February 15, 2015.

⁴⁸ *Evangelii Gaudium* 113.

There has been in history the temptation for some to say [that] the church is only the church of the pure, the perfectly consistent, and expels all the rest. This is not true! This is heresy! The church, which is holy, does not reject sinners.⁴⁹

In those who make up the church, pastors and faithful, there are shortcomings, imperfections, and sins. The pope has these too-and many of them.⁵⁰

She [the church] does not reject us all; she does not reject because she calls everyone, welcomes them, is open even to those furthest from her; she calls all to allow themselves to be enfolded by the mercy, the tenderness, and the forgiveness of the Father.⁵¹

Indeed, God, in his design of love, does not want to exclude anyone, but wants to include everyone In the Gospel of Matthew ... Jesus addresses a truly universal invitation: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (11:28). No one is excluded from this call, because Jesus's mission is to reveal the Father's love to everyone.... This aspect of mercy, inclusion, is manifested in opening one's arms wide to welcome, without excluding, without labeling others according to their social status, language, race, culture, or religion; there is, before us, only a person to be loved as God loves [him or her]. The person whom I find at my work, in my neighborhood, is a person to love, as God loves. "But he is from that country, or that other country, or of this religion, or another ..." [No,] he is a person whom God loves and I have to love him. This is to include, and this is inclusion.⁵²

May the church be a place of God's mercy and hope, where all feel welcomed, loved, forgiven, and encouraged to live according to the good life of the gospel.⁵³

⁴⁹ General Audience, October 2, 2013.

⁵⁰ General Audience, May 29, 2013.

⁵¹ General Audience, October 2, 2013.

⁵² Jubilee Audience, November 12, 2016.

⁵³ General Audience, June 12, 2013.