News



by Joshua J. McElwee

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Pope Francis is asking the Catholic Church not to see families as a kind of workshop to try out different pastoral strategies but as a "privileged place" where God is alive and at work in the world, Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich said Oct. 5.

At a first-of-its-kind conference for U.S. bishops and theologians to consider how to better implement *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis' 2016 apostolic exhortation on family life, Cupich said the pope focuses on how "God has chosen to reveal the divine reality in the privileged place of family life."

"How true that is, if you look at the opening chapters of Genesis, all the way to the final scene in the Book of Revelation," Cupich said. "The context is always families, people coming together as families."

"That it is the privileged place that God has chosen in order for us to come to know who God is," he said. "It is not so much that we are treating families as a kind of a laboratory in which we do pastoral practice or theology, but rather it's a privileged place that we are graced to be a part of ... to see where God is active, where God is alive and God is doing something new."

Cupich is co-hosting the conference at Boston College with Jesuit Fr. James Keenan, a theologian at the university. During the two-day event, two cardinals, 12 bishops

and 24 other invited participants are discussing what organizers call the "new momentum" *Amoris Laetitia* (in English, "The Joy of Love") gives local bishops to renew their pastoral practices toward families.

The opening of the event included five panel discussions among some of the country's most prominent prelates, theologians and canon lawyers. Discussions on the first day have focused on how the apostolic exhortation has been received in different communities across the U.S. and how priests and seminarians in formation understand its teachings.

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Much of the language in the panel discussions carried common themes centered on the respect *Amoris Laetitia* shows toward the ability of families to discern and take decisions about what is best for them.

Cupich nodded toward these common themes with a personal story about his grandparents, Croatian immigrants who lived in Omaha, Nebraska. He said that the last of their four children, Roseanne, had emotional and mental handicaps.

Because Roseanne could become violent, the couple made the decision to put her in a facility that could give her appropriate care. After telling their parish priest about the decision, the monsignor said they could not "abandon" their child.

Cupich recalled his grandfather asking his grandmother what they would do after visiting the priest. "Grandmother said they were going to take the child to the home," Cupich said, before quoting her response to her husband: "Monsignor doesn't have to live with Roseanne."

He said his grandmother told him that story the week after he was ordained a priest.

"I believe she did it to tell me I should look for a different way to work with people and treat them, and ... to have a conversion of heart, to really be in touch with the ordinary life situation that people have to struggle with each and every day as they make some very difficult decisions," he said. "We have to integrate [people] into the life of the church with the struggles that they have."

Reversing 'infantilization of laity'

After Cupich, the first talks at the conference Oct. 5 focused on how Francis' apostolic exhortation is being received by Latino and black Catholic communities in the U.S.

Natalia Imperatori-Lee, a theologian at Manhattan College, said Latino reception of *Amoris Laetitia* "cannot be understood" outside the historical legacy of the colonial system in the Americas.

Imperatori-Lee said that in Francis' call for better respect of decisions laypeople make in their lives, Latinos see the pope "pointing to the infantilization of laypeople and families that is so commonly a feature of colonization."

"The infantilization of the laity has its historical roots in a view of laypeople as objects of clerical control: pay, pray and obey, or as Pius X notes in [the 1906 encyclical] *Vehementer Nos*, 'the right of the laity is to allow itself to be led,' " she said.

Imperatori-Lee said Francis, however, sees the family as "the protagonist of its own destiny."

"Couples become the subjects of their history, even as pastors and confessors retain a role of accompaniment and listening," she said.

She also mentioned Francis' call in *Amoris Laetitia* for pastors to respect decisions laypeople make in conscience after a process of discernment. "We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them," the pope wrote in the document.

"The replacement of conscience is an act of domination, again colonization," she said, paraphrasing Peruvian theologian Gregorio Pérez. "It is an abuse of power. The formation of conscience, on the other hand, is life-giving ministry."

C. Vanessa White, a theologian at Catholic Theological Union, focused on how the black Catholic community has understood the exhortation. To prepare for her talk, she sought input from other black Catholic theologians and lay ministers on how the document had affected their parishes.

"Sad to say, most of those who responded say there has been little impact," said White.

One lay minister told her: "When *Amoris Laetitia* first came out it was discussed briefly ... but there wasn't an overall interest from the parish to read the document in its entirety.

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"Some of our families are in survival mode, struggling with under- and unemployment, divorce and single parenthood," said that minister. "Families are simply trying to ensure their children are not victims of the violence that plagues our city."

"I would say rather than just talking about 'The Joy of Love' as a document, we who have read it are attempting to use it as a guide to provide the support that our families need," the minister continued.

After sharing that input, White concluded that *Amoris Laetitia* "must be in dialogue with the life and context of the people. Church leadership must learn and continue to make strides to understand the context of black people."

Divorce and remarriage

Cathleen Kaveny, a theologian and civil lawyer at Boston College, spoke about how the church considers people who have been divorced and remarried without first obtaining annulments.

Kaveny used her dual professional background to examine how the church might turn to U.S. civil law as a resource for a re-evaluation of how it sees remarriage as a continuing kind of adultery.

She cited a case in which the Supreme Court decided that prosecutors pursuing a case against polygamists could not charge them with separate counts for each year they were married because the crime had to align with the "lived experience" of the people at question.

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"Jesus clearly disfavored adultery," Kaveny concluded. "It's clear that he rejects divorce and remarriage as contrary to the original will of God. But nothing in Jesus' words or conduct demand that the sin involved in divorce and remarriage must be

conceptualized as a sin that continues indefinitely, without the possibility of effective repentance."

"To impose such a requirement in every case is not merciful," she said. "And mercy is the ultimate touchstone for the divine lawgiver."

"We do not need to disturb Jesus' teaching in order to refine and develop it in these ways, in ways that moral theologians and canon lawyers have always done," she said.

The Boston College event continues Oct. 6 with panel discussions on how the apostolic exhortation engages in a pastoral process marked by discernment and accompaniment, and the challenges the document presents to theologians and pastors.

Among the speakers Oct. 6 are Atlanta Archbishop Wilton Gregory, Malta Archbishop Charles Scicluna and San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy.

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

This story appears in the **Amoris Laetitia** feature series. View the full series.
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