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The wounds will not heal if the teachings remain the same

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

Last week, many Catholics, after reading Pope Francis' latest thoughts on homosexuality, spoken during his conversation with Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro, hailed the new pontiff's words as a breath of fresh air, a new directive for the church, and a promising sign of change to come.

To me, he sounded like my in-laws. Allow me to explain.

When my partner, Gretchen, and I met, she had not yet come out to her conservative, evangelical family. Three months into our relationship, she took the courageous step of telling her mother, father and three siblings the truth about her sexual orientation. To say that they were not pleased with her announcement would be a gross understatement.

After two and a half years of avoiding me, Gretchen's parents took the bold step of welcoming me to their home in Grand Rapids, Mich., one of this country's heartlands of Calvinist evangelicalism.

To my surprise, they welcomed me with classic Midwestern hospitality. They invited me into their home, embraced me, fed me. Gretchen and I were stunned that our first meeting, which we honestly thought might never happen in our lifetimes, went so well and so smoothly.

So imagine my surprise when, a few weeks later, we learned that though Gretchen's family enjoyed meeting me and were glad that she was happy, safe and well cared for, the life we share was not the life they wanted for her.

Three years since that first visit, I have returned to Grand Rapids at least half a dozen times, always to the

same warm reception. But as well as each visit goes, each time we return to New York, we are reminded by Gretchen's parents that, though we both seem to be thriving, they wish we could find a way to live chastely, to just be friends.

"I'm not sure if homosexuality is a sin," Gretchen's sister gently told her after our last visit, "but I'm glad I don't have to be the one to judge you."

Although Gretchen's family is always welcoming and embracing of us, ultimately, they still believe we are living a life of sin and going against God's plan.

I cannot tell you how this wounds our spirits.

There are days when I almost feel I would rather forgo all of the hospitality and good times and great meals in exchange for having our relationship seen as equally good, as potentially holy, as deserving of dignity and respect, as Gretchen's brother's heterosexual marriage is.

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A warm welcome, I have learned, can be misleading. That is why I remain wary of Pope Francis' words about gays and lesbians. Because regardless of how welcoming Francis seems to want to be of us, he has been frank in his belief that "the teaching of the church, for that matter, is clear and I am a son of the church."

"During the return flight from Rio de Janeiro I said that if a homosexual person is of good will and is in search of God, I am no one to judge," Francis says a little earlier in the interview. "By saying this, I said what the catechism says."

Although Francis thinks gays and lesbians should be treated with compassion, respect and sensitivity, he still believes homosexual acts are disordered and sinful. That, after all, is what the catechism says, too.

"In Buenos Aires I used to receive letters from homosexual persons who are 'socially wounded' because they tell me that they feel like the church has always condemned them," Francis also says. "But the church does not want to do this."

What Francis doesn't seem to understand is that it is precisely the teaching of the church that is doing the wounding. If the teaching remains the same, the harm will only continue, regardless of how warm the welcome appears to be.

Many Catholics, including gay and lesbian Catholics, were elated to read Francis' words, "heal the wounds." But it is important to look at the analogy Francis uses to express this idea:

"I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds."

Francis is encouraging the church's ministers to reach out and heal the "social wounds" the church has inflicted on gays and lesbians like me.

But if I follow his analogy, once those wounds have healed, the church should also be sure to schedule a follow-up visit with me to talk about my chronic condition of having a same-sex partner.

I realize Francis does not want me to feel that the church is condemning me, but if its teachings continue to insist that my love of my partner is a sin, how can I ever feel truly embraced and equal in this church? My wounds can never fully heal under these conditions.

I'm equally wary of how the "heal the wounds" idea applies to the other pelvic zone issues -- issues that, Francis says, are spoken of too much.

I understand the relief that many Catholics felt upon hearing Francis admit that it is not necessary to talk about issues of contraception, homosexuality and abortion "all of the time," as well as his criticism of pastoral ministers who are "obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently."

From an administrative point of view, Francis is wise to tell the bishops to refrain from their preoccupation with pelvic zone issues. In many cases, their obsessive talk has gotten them nowhere. In the U.S. and much of Europe, they have failed to win any battles over these issues, and their failures continue to stretch into traditional Catholic countries in the global South, like Mexico, Brazil and, yes, Argentina.

But let's remember the real problem here. The trouble is not so much that these issues are spoken of constantly, but that the talk has been a monologue of the hierarchy. The leaders of the church refuse to listen to the voice of God, who speaks through the people, through their needs, through their cries for justice.

Speaking less about pelvic zone issues will not make the harm they cause go away. Yes, it might put a kinder, more pastoral face on the church. But it could also create an avoidance of what are, in many corners of this world, crucial, life-or-death concerns.

What good is a more pastoral church when ultimately, gays and lesbians are still told their relationships are sinful, women are still barred from answering God's calling to ordained ministry, African women and men routinely infected by HIV/AIDS cannot get access to condoms, women in need of life-saving abortions are forced to die, and starving families in countries like the Philippines are denied access to contraception?

Less obsession about pelvic zone issues won't reduce the spiritual harm, violence, starvation, illness and death perpetuated by the hierarchy's refusal to deal with these challenges with honesty, humility and openness.

For all of his encouraging talk about a "big tent" church rather than a "small chapel," Francis seems firmly committed to keeping the doctrines as they are. This reality seems reinforced by the fact that, just days after the interview appeared, he reappointed all of Benedict's watchdogs to their posts at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Whether the institutional church is leaner and meaner or kinder and gentler, the church's pelvic zone teachings will continue to do harm. Until the needs of the people of God are heard and the teachings are finally changed, the wounds can never really be healed.

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