

# Homosexuality, Crisis, and Communal Discernment

## A Reflection on the Catholic Church's Crisis-Inducing Attitude on Homosexuality

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*Abstract.* — In this contribution we zoom in on the crisis around homosexuality within the church, triggered by the February 2021 *responsum* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF). This *responsum* exposed the tension between the church and cultures, between the leadership of the church and the faithful, and between different ideologies within the church. At the same time, the *responsum* painfully expressed the negation of the synodal spirit present in *Amoris Laetitia*, which came out of the Synod on the Family in 2015. The crisis brought about by the *responsum* calls for further communal discernment, following the discernment processes during the Synod on the Family in 2015, and for processes of reconciliation. As the church struggles to recalibrate its teaching on sexuality, it excludes groups of people, hurting those who are involved with them, and burdening every form of pastoral care. Can a process of communal discernment and a synodal church bring change?

### 1. Introduction

Few in the West would deny that the Catholic Church is in crisis. The distance between certain aspects of her teaching and the daily life of the faithful is constantly widening. The balancing act that the Church must perform in every age between her rich tradition, the People of God, and the present culture seems to be a difficult one. The Church struggles to recalibrate its teaching on sexuality, thereby excluding groups of people, hurting those who are involved with them, and burdening every form of pastoral care. Can a process of communal discernment and a synodal church bring change? In this contribution we zoom in on the crisis around homosexuality within the Church, triggered by the *responsum* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in February 2021. This *responsum* exposed the tension between the Church and cultures, between the leadership of the Church and the faithful, and between the different ideologies within the Church. At the same time, the *responsum*

painfully expressed the negation of the synodal spirit as present in *Amoris Laetitia* as a result of the Synod on the Family in 2015. The crisis brought about by the *responsum* calls for further communal discernment, following discernment processes during the Synod on the Family in 2015, and for processes of reconciliation.

## 2. A Church in Need of Discernment

One of the main questions for church members is: what path should the Catholic Church take regarding its future and that of the world? This is a question that also engages Professor Jacques Haers, SJ. The succession of crises in the Church and in society make this question even more pressing. It seems that the world is at a turning point as far as ecology, reconciliation from polarization, health, and democracy are concerned. The question of the future path is vital and urgent from the point of view of the recent crises in the Church, which have eroded its credibility as an institution. A significant group of the faithful express the desire for the Church as an institution to undergo profound change.

Pope Francis has brought the Catholic Church into a synodal process in which common discernment plays an essential role. The Catholic Church is synodal in its essence because of the baptism of the faithful. All the baptized are invited to journey together and give shape to the Church of God that serves the world. The papacy of Francis seems to be on its way to bringing about a paradigm shift from a clerical church to a synodal church where listening and communal discernment are the instruments to meet differences and address them in a constructive manner, both in the relationship between the Church and world, and in the relationships within the Church. As emphasized in Vatican II, the Holy Spirit plays an important role in the process of common discernment. Pope Francis also emphasizes servant-leadership in the process of guiding common discernment.

Homosexuality is one theme that proves difficult for the Catholic Church in its dialogue with contemporary societies, and it is equally difficult for the Church's internal dialogue. It is often argued by some that homosexuality is primarily a problem between the Church and Western societies. Within the African Church, for example, some church leaders are very outspoken about this. On the one hand, there are attempts to prevent the topic of homosexuality from becoming part of a common discernment process within the world Church. During the group discussions in the Synod on the Family, for example, the African

Cardinal Sarah prevented pastoral care for homosexual people from being discussed.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, several African bishops and bishops' conferences oppose homosexuality in their culture and emphasize that this phenomenon is alien to their cultural values.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, other voices are also heard in Africa. LGBTQ+ Christians are starting to unite and make their voices heard, and some African theologians are denouncing the bishops' attitude and reflecting on diversity in sexual identity.<sup>3</sup> The diversity of perspectives on homosexuality creates conflict and complicates a common discernment process within the Church.

For Professor Haers, communal discernment and reconciliation processes are essential for the whole Church. The starting point for all this theological reflection is that it should serve the Church and society, and that it should be developed from a fundamental commitment to both. Theology needs to be relevant, as can be seen from his reflections and actions around reconciliation, liberation, and sustainability. During the time when the CDF condemned the blessing of homosexual relationships in 2021, I spoke often with Professor Haers about this issue. Under his leadership, the University Parish (KU Leuven) took a very critical approach to the *responsum*. It seemed to me an appropriate theme for this contribution, which also allows me to express my gratitude for his theological reflection and his faithful friendship. *Amicitia pulchra est*.

### 3. *Responsum ad dubium* regarding Blessings of Same Sex Marriages in 2021

On February 22, 2021, the CDF shared a message stating that same sex marriages cannot be blessed because God cannot bless sin. The message

1. Elena Curti, "Cardinal Sarah Blocked Discussion of Gays, Says Bishop," *The Tablet*, 24 October (2015), <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/2785/cardinal-sarah-blocked-discussion-of-gays-says-bishop> [accessed October 30, 2021].

2. Charles Senghor, "Senegalese Bishops Reiterate Condemnation of Homosexuality," *La Croix International*, 1 June 2021, <https://international.la-croix.com/news/ethics/senegalese-bishops-reiterate-condemnation-of-homosexuality/14399> [accessed October 30, 2021]: "The bishops reiterate their declaration of Thies made in November 2019 to reject homosexuality and pedophilia, which are contrary to our values," said Archbishop Benjamin Ndiaye of Dakar on May 28." Agnes Aineah, "Catholic Bishops in Ghana Support Government Bill to Outlaw Homosexual Practices," *ACI Africa*, 11 October 2021, <https://www.aciafrica.org/news/4441/catholic-bishops-in-ghana-support-government-bill-to-outlaw-homosexual-practices> [accessed October 30, 2021].

3. Adriaan van Klinken, "Changing the Narrative of Sexuality in African Christianity: Bishop Christopher Senyonjo's LGBT Advocacy," *Theology & Sexuality* 26, no. 1 (2020): 1-6.

was an answer to a question (*dubium*) the CDF received: “Does the Church have the power to give the blessing to unions of persons of the same sex?”<sup>4</sup> The CDF catalogues a blessing under sacramentals where it is important that what is blessed be in accordance with God’s design that was laid in creation: “... it is necessary that what is blessed be objectively and positively ordered to receive and express grace, according to the designs of God inscribed in creation, and fully revealed by Christ the Lord.” The words “objectively and positively ordered” are used by the Church in their antithesis to describe homosexuality as “objectively disordered.” Thus, a homosexual relationship cannot be blessed because it is not a marriage between a man and a woman which is open to the transmission of life.<sup>5</sup> Striking in the *responsum* is the attention paid to securing the sacrament of marriage. No relationship can be compared to the marital commitment between a man and woman. Although the *responsum* of the CDF emphasizes on two occasions that it does not intend to discriminate, it was understood that way by much of the public. The CDF again emphasizes in an article of commentary to the *responsum* that it does not intend to make a negative judgment on homosexual persons but, instead, on the blessing of their relationship: “This is so that the negative judgment on the blessing of unions of persons of the same sex does not imply a judgment on persons.”<sup>6</sup> The CDF refers to *Amoris Laetitia* and other documents stating that homosexual persons should be accepted with respect, to no avail. Reactions worldwide were largely scathing.

A storm of reactions followed in Flanders as well, both in the secular media and from the Flemish Catholic Church itself.<sup>7</sup> The complete

4. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Responsum of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a dubium regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex,” Vatican, 22 February 2021, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20210222\\_responsum-dubium-unioni\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20210222_responsum-dubium-unioni_en.html) [accessed October 19, 2021].

5. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Responsum”: “For this reason, it is not licit to impart a blessing on relationships, or partnerships, even stable, that involve sexual activity outside of marriage (i.e., outside the indissoluble union of a man and a woman open in itself to the transmission of life), as is the case of the unions between persons of the same sex.”

6. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Article of Commentary on the Responsum ad dubium,” Vatican, 22 February 2021, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20210222\\_articolo-responsum-dubium-unioni\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20210222_articolo-responsum-dubium-unioni_en.html) [accessed October 19, 2021].

7. It remains noteworthy that the Catholic Church in Flanders reacted much more in the media than the Catholic Church in The Netherlands. According to Professor Jos Moons, SJ, this is due to a certain perspective on being Church where criticism is seen as disobedience to the tradition and the authority. Within that vision there is no need to ask questions or to have conversations. See Jos Moons, “Vragen bij een katholieke

bishops' conference published a statement with the interesting title "Discerning, accompanying and integrating."<sup>8</sup> The bishops start by acknowledging the pain that the *responsum* causes to those among the faithful who identify as homosexual. Central to the statement of the bishops is the motivation for actors in the Catholic community to continue to work towards a climate of respect, recognition, and integration in the spirit of *Amoris Laetitia* in which discernment, accompaniment, and integration are key words for the bishops. With this declaration, the Belgian Bishops emphasize the importance of *Amoris Laetitia*, and it can be interpreted as preferring the spirit of the papal exhortation to that of the *responsum*. The bishop of Antwerp, Johan Bonny, expressed in an opinion editorial, his shame and indignation at the outright ignoring by the *responsum* of the synodal process as expressed in *Amoris Laetitia*.<sup>9</sup> In his letter, he apologizes to all those offended by the *responsum*. Furthermore, Bishop Bonny highlights the sharp distinction between the synodal decisions in 2015 and the *responsum* which does not reflect the same theological nuance, pastoral care, ethical accuracy, and scientific foundation. The Synod already confirmed the falsity of the proposition that no similarity is possible between same-sex marriage and heterosexual marriage. The synod fathers avoided using the term sin to characterize an entire category of people, whereas the *responsum* does. While the Synod provided the impetus to search for appropriate rituals to bless homosexual relationships, the *responsum* rejects any possibility of blessing these relationships. Bonny's opinion editorial points to the fact that the CDF is disregarding the ideas of the Synod and is using an outdated and low-quality theology.<sup>10</sup> In a webinar hosted by *The Tablet* (April 2021), Bishop Bonny spoke about the dramatic backlash of the *responsum* for the Belgian Church: more than 2000 people cancelled their baptismal registrations in Flemish dioceses alone. Thus, for a group of people the *responsum* was just one step too far. The rector and vice-rectors of the oldest Catholic university in the world, the KU Leuven, also

stille," *Nederlands Dagblad*, 26 March 2021, <https://www.nd.nl/opinie/opinie/1026884/vragen-bij-een-katholieke-stilte> [accessed October 19, 2021].

8. The Belgian Bishops' Conference, "Onderscheiden, begeleiden en integreren," Communiqué, Mechelen, 17 March 2021, <https://www.kerknet.be/bisschoppenconferentie/persbericht/onderscheiden-begeleiden-en-integreren> [accessed November 2, 2021].

9. Johan Bonny, "Ik voel plaatsvervangende schaamte voor mijn Kerk," *De Standaard*, 17 March 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210316\\_98069552](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210316_98069552) [accessed November 2, 2021].

10. Bonny, "Ik voel plaatsvervangende schaamte": "Sin is one of the most difficult theological and moral categories to define, and one of the last to pin on people and their way of living together" (my translation).

reacted with an opinion editorial in the media.<sup>11</sup> They criticize the fact that the Vatican is not yet able to deal with human diversity and wonder if it is aware of the devastating effect of this *responsum* on the world. After all, such a text gives ammunition to homophobia and justifies exclusionary mechanisms used against homosexual people worldwide. At the same time, they emphasize that KU Leuven chooses to be an inclusive Catholic university where, from a Christian perspective on human beings and the world, there is room for dealing with similarities and differences. As an inclusive Catholic university they want to be a critical thinking center for the Catholic community and hold up a mirror to the Church where necessary. This opinion editorial is reminiscent of the speech former rector De Somer gave to Pope John Paul II during his visit to the university in 1985. He saw it as the university's task to be a study and research center for the Church: "In that capacity KU Leuven considers it its duty to continually question established truths and if necessary to adapt them to the language and thinking of the times."<sup>12</sup> A lot of international ink was also spilled on the *responsum* of the CDF. For example, the French theologian, Isabelle Parmentier, sees the document as a political move against the Pope who had previously spoken of the right of homosexual persons to have a family and to have their relationship recognized in civil law.<sup>13</sup>

One of the questions the faithful have indeed been asking is whether Pope Francis supports the *responsum* of the CDF. This question is important because of the positive value attributed in the media and among the faithful to the Pope's seemingly greater openness to homosexual believers and their relationships. The *responsum* of the CDF says: "*The Sovereign Pontiff Francis, at the Audience granted to the undersigned Secretary of this Congregation, was informed and gave his assent to the publication of the above-mentioned Responsum ad dubium, with the annexed Explanatory Note.*"<sup>14</sup> Various media outlets have questioned whether Pope Francis, in the Angelus of March 21, 2021, openly distanced himself from the *responsum*. In his commentary on that day's Gospel, he calls on Christians

11. Luc Sels et al., "Het Vaticaan begrijpt het (nog) niet," *De Standaard*, 18 March 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210317\\_98053161](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210317_98053161) [accessed October 29, 2021].

12. Rector Piet De Somer, "Speech on the Occasion of the Visit of Pope John Paul II in Leuven on May 20<sup>th</sup>," [https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/some012visi01\\_01/some012visi01\\_01\\_0018.php](https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/some012visi01_01/some012visi01_01_0018.php) [accessed October 19, 2021].

13. Isabelle Parmentier, "Bénédiction des couples homosexuels: ne nous visez pas l'espérance!" *La Croix*, 22 March 2021, <https://www.la-croix.com/Debats/Benediction-couples-homosexuels-nous-volez-pas-lesperance-2021-03-22-1201146998> [accessed November 2, 2021].

14. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Responsum."

to bear witness to Jesus by gestures of love and not by “fleeting words.”<sup>15</sup> He goes on to speak about dry soil caused by misunderstandings, difficulties, persecutions, legalism, and clerical moralism. Three sources in the Vatican confirmed to the media the suggestion that Pope Francis here-with wants to distance himself from the *responsum* of the CDF.

#### 4. The Achilles’ Heel of the Catholic Church: Its Sexual Ethics

The aggravation about the *responsum* of the CDF is part of a much wider area of tension within the Church caused by its sexual ethics.

The Church takes the so-called natural law position that sexuality can only be seen as morally good when it is expressed between a man and a woman within the context of marriage and with openness to procreation. This, the Church says, is how God intended it from the beginning of creation (natural law). The Church has no power over God’s designs but can only bear witness to them.<sup>16</sup> Natural law ethics allows for respect and acceptance of homosexual persons if they are not sexually active. This position is reiterated in the *responsum* of the CDF in 2021. According to personalism, which gained international importance in theological ethics under the influence of Leuven professor Louis Janssens, the perspective of natural law holds a very limited view on sexuality. Sexuality is viewed mainly from the perspective of procreation, but much less from its meaning for a relationship. This perspective on sexuality, in which openness to procreation should always be present, also determines the Vatican’s view on contraception, sterilization, and condom use. For decades, the Church’s teachings on sexuality have been severely criticized by such ethicists as Louis Janssens, Joseph Selling, Roger Burggraeve, and Paul Schotsmans.<sup>17</sup> Leuven personalism values a human person in all their dimensions and in all their relationships. A human person only flourishes when they can develop physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually in connectedness with others, with

15. Gerald O’Connell, “Vatican Sources Suspect Pope Francis Was Distancing Himself from CDF Statement on Same-sex Unions in Address,” *America Magazine*, March 21, 2021, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/03/21/pope-francis-same-sex-unions-statement-240291> [accessed November 3, 2021].

16. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Article of Commentary”: “This all implies a power that the Church does not possess, because she does not have the power over God’s designs, which would otherwise be rejected and denied. The Church is not the arbiter of these designs and the truths they express, but their faithful interpreter and witness.”

17. Joseph A. Selling, ed., *Personalist Morals: Essays in Honor of Professor Louis Janssens* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1988).

creation, and with God.<sup>18</sup> The sexual ethics of the Church falls short of promoting the human person in all their dimensions by linking sexuality exclusively to procreation and to a marital relationship between a man and a woman. Where human persons in their deepest core are connected to others, to creation, and to God, the Church's sexual ethics brings with it exclusionary mechanisms that are diametrically opposed to this reality.

The Church's sexual ethics has dire consequences in the present day. Because the Church has placed so much emphasis on its sexual ethics, it is still largely identified with it. The shadow of the Church's sexual ethics is very long and obscures the valuable and fundamental contributions it has in the fields of social ethics and ecology. In addition, to this day, it is unimaginable how many people are hurt by the exclusionary processes brought about by the Church's sexual ethics. The pain of exclusion is magnified by the stigmatizing label of sin. Moreover, the rigid attitude towards sexual ethics has an inhibiting effect on the dialogue between the Church's leadership, the sciences, and society. Because the Church holds to its exclusive thinking in which sexuality can only take place between a man and a woman (in the context of marriage with openness to procreation), there is no recognition of homosexual relationships. And because there is not enough integration of scientific knowledge in thinking about identity in relation to sexuality, people who identify as transgender or genderfluid also find themselves in a field of tension with Church teaching. Finally, there is the matter of fragmentation and self-deception within the highest circles of the Vatican itself.<sup>19</sup> The reputation of the members of the curia has been seriously damaged in recent years by its slow and covert reactions to sexual abuse by members of the clergy, by the financial scandals of the Vatican bank, and by the hidden homosexuality in its own circles. The latter reality is denied and then attacked in others through a destructive schizophrenic process of fragmentation and self-deception.

Over the past 30 years, several theologians and priests have pointed out the high concentration of men with a homosexual orientation in the group of seminarians and priests (compared to society). Donald Cozzens even spoke as early as 2006 about "the growing awareness that the priesthood is or is becoming a 'gay profession'."<sup>20</sup> The abuse scandal in the Church has

18. Johan Bonny, Roger Burggraeve, and Ilse Van Halst, *Please? Thank You! Sorry... A Dialogue on Love, Marriage and Family Life in the Light of Pope Francis' Logic of Mercy and Discernment (Amoris Laetitia)* (Antwerp and 's-Hertogenbosch: Gompel & Svacina, 2021).

19. Frédéric Martel, *In the Closet of the Vatican: Power, Homosexuality, Hypocrisy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

20. Donald Cozzens, *Freeing Celibacy* (Collegeville, MN: Order of Saint Benedict, 2006), 65.



contributed to this awareness because many of the victims turned out to be (post-pubescent) boys. In response, the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education published a contested instruction in 2005 that was intended to prevent certain gay men from being admitted into seminaries:

In the light of this teaching, this Dicastery, in agreement with the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, deems it necessary to clearly state that the Church, while deeply respecting the persons in question, cannot admit to the Seminary and to Holy Orders those who practice homosexuality, have deeply rooted homosexual tendencies or support the so-called gay culture.<sup>21</sup>

The instruction remains very vague about how all this can be discerned and is described by Donald Cozzens as a moral minefield.<sup>22</sup> Also, in this document, the Church makes a distinction between homosexual acts, that are considered sins, and homosexual tendencies which need to be controlled. The tension between the teachings of the Church and the reality of homosexual priests creates closed sub-systems in which the latter partake.<sup>23</sup> Out of fear of being characterized by their own homosexual orientation, silence is maintained, and hidden networks of priests emerge in which the secret of their orientation is shared. Wherever orientation needs to remain hidden, there is room for degeneration.<sup>24</sup> A church culture that drives people underground deprives the whole community of the opportunity to reap the benefits of healthy theological reflection on love and homosexuality and perpetuates exclusionary mechanisms.

### 5. Homosexuality as a Positive Reality within the Community of Faith

Any process of communal discernment and of reconciliation with groups hurt by the Church's teachings must start from homosexuality as a positive human reality that is present in all cultures and within all religions. Jan van Kilsdonk SJ, student pastor in Amsterdam, spoke as early as

21. Congregation for Catholic Education, "Instruction of the Congregation for Catholic Education regarding the criteria for vocational discernment regarding persons with homosexual tendencies in view of their admission to the seminary and to sacred orders," Vatican, 2005, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20051104\\_istruzione\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20051104_istruzione_en.html) [accessed October 30, 2021].

22. Cozzens, *Freeing Celibacy*, 66.

23. Mark Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 106.

24. Martel, *In the Closet of the Vatican*.

1960 of homosexuality as a “talent of a woman loving a woman or a man a man, woven into the tapestry of history with such regularity that we must speak of a fascinating constant.”<sup>25</sup> He called homosexuality “a finding of the Creator” and was rebuked from Rome for his views and his blessing of same-sex relationships. Sixty years later the Church can still learn from van Kilsdonk to talk about homosexuality and homosexual relationships in an appreciative and respectful way.

Seeing homosexuality as a positive reality begins with a recognition of the presence of persons with this orientation in all levels of the Church community, from ordinary believers to cardinals. Recognizing this reality can lead to talking about it in a public forum and, on the other hand, to the healthy, personal integration of sexual orientation.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, it is very helpful that Pope Francis occasionally makes statements regarding homosexual persons that are non-judgmental. By doing so, he contributes to a climate where homosexuality can be discussed within the Church. The recognition of the homosexual community also means emphasizing that these people have the same value as others based on their baptism.<sup>27</sup>

A process of communal discernment needs to fundamentally reflect on whether, within an appreciative integration of persons with a homosexual orientation, homosexual relationships can still be seen as objectively disordered. This inevitably involves other questions such as: what kind of creation theology is the base for the teachings of the Church? Which images of God are to be discerned in our tradition? What image of human persons is related to this? And above all: how is God actively present in our interconnectedness and what does the Holy Spirit want to say to us today about human relationships?

If homosexuality can be seen as a variant in God’s creation, then a blessing of a homosexual relationship is inevitable. Professor Haers says the following about this:

I am very grateful for all the strong reactions to the Vatican document on the blessing of homosexual relationships. Surely, we can underline with appreciation that many homosexual persons and

25. Alex Verburg, *Pater van Kilsdonk: Raadsman in delicate zaken. Memoires* (Amsterdam: Atlas Contact, 2013).

26. Cozzens, *Freeing Celibacy*, 69: “To the extent that sexuality remains unintegrated into an individual’s personality and psychic life, it remains potentially dangerous, waiting to erupt in destructive ways to both the individual and others.”

27. James Martin, SJ, *Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 35.

couples are a real and valuable blessing for our society and our Church communities. How can we refuse to bless those who are a blessing to us and a concrete expression of God's love?<sup>28</sup>

## 6. Common Discernment and the Importance of Leadership and Pastoral Care

Common discernment on homosexuality is a process that can happen in several places: during a synodal process involving all the faithful, in the context of academic theological reflection, and at the level of church leadership. A dialogue between these three places is indispensable.

The synodal process, officially launched in Rome in October 2021, is taking place at a time that many feel is a tipping point in the area of democracy, health, and especially ecology. On the one hand, a succession of ecological crises and the pandemic have led to a growing awareness that excessive individualism is inadequate, and that we are fundamentally connected to each other and to creation. On the other hand, there is an enormous polarization at just about every level of society. This polarization also exists within the Catholic Church and between the Christian churches. A topic like homosexuality highlights the great differences that exist within the Catholic Church. Can common discernment within a synodal process provide an answer to this? Brother Aloïs, Prior of Taizé, states that the mutual differences can only be fruitful if, at the same time, the community is strengthened by a reconciliatory dialogue.<sup>29</sup> In this regard, he considers it appropriate to pause occasionally in the synodal process to celebrate the unity achieved, and to allow for an ecumenical perspective. The introduction of an ecumenical perspective seems essential to break through the inward orientation of the Church. On the other hand, it must be said that the Catholic Church is often milder regarding homosexuality than some other Christian churches.

A common discernment process on homosexuality stands or falls with the openness to welcome complexity and other perspectives. This

28. Jacques Haers, Facebook message, 17 March 2021.

29. Brother Aloïs, "Message for the Opening of the Synodal Journey in Rome," Vatican, 9 October 2021, [https://www.taize.fr/en\\_article32595.html](https://www.taize.fr/en_article32595.html) [accessed October 25, 2021]: "At the very heart of the Catholic Church, the synod will bring to light great diversities. These will be all the more fruitful if the search for communion is deepened at the same time. Not in order to avoid or to hide conflicts, but to nourish a dialogue that reconciles. To encourage this, it seems to me desirable that there should be, on the synodal journey, moments to catch our breath, like little breaks, to celebrate the unity which is already accomplished in Christ and to make it visible."

presupposes an ability to put one's beliefs into perspective and to welcome dissident opinions. Anyone who has been taught by Professor Haers knows that his favorite Bible story – the story of the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-30) – exactly articulates this step of a common discernment process: Jesus discovers, through the woman's words regarding the crumbs of the table, a new part of his vocation. She offers him a perspective beyond his understanding of what God has called him to do.

It is not the purpose of this contribution to illuminate the steps of common discernment, nor to reflect on common discernment in theology. On this last point, Professor Haers has already done an excellent job.<sup>30</sup> I would just like to touch upon two important aspects of common discernment.

The first key focus is the question of leadership. Simply put, what kind of leadership is needed in the context of common discernment? Pope Francis emphasizes servant leadership whereby bishops are no longer seen as the top of the pyramid, but as the serving and supporting point of an inverted pyramid.<sup>31</sup> A lot of questions remain unanswered: is a clerical church capable of servant leadership? Can the leadership go beyond listening and integrate the *sensus fidelium* into its teaching? What is the relationship between discerning the presence of the Holy Spirit and ecclesial leadership? Can a clerical church truly become a synodal church when the only decision-making power in a synodal process lies with the clergy (that is, the bishops)?

A second important aspect in the context of common discernment is bridging the gap between doctrine and pastoral care. Pope Francis frequently emphasizes the importance of Christians and the Church to give witness to Jesus through gestures of love, not through condemnation. There are three words that he stresses: closeness, compassion, and tenderness.<sup>32</sup> It is certainly true that Pope Francis has a great pastoral sensitivity and approach. That comes with the risk of maintaining the gap between

30. Jacques Haers, "A Synodal Process on Synodality: Synodal Missionary Journeying and the Common Apostolic Discernment," *Louvain Studies* 43 (2020): 215-238.

31. Pope Francis' speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of the synod of bishops, Vatican, 17 October 2015, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html) [accessed November 2, 2021]: "But in this Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base. Consequently, those who exercise authority are called 'ministers', because, in the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all. It is in serving the people of God that each bishop becomes, for that portion of the flock entrusted to him, *vicarius Christi*, the vicar of that Jesus who at the Last Supper bent down to wash the feet of the Apostles (cf. Jn 13:1-15). And in a similar perspective, the Successor of Peter is nothing else if not the *servus servorum Dei*."

32. O'Connell, "Vatican Sources."

pastoral care and doctrine. When doctrine is exclusionary and unmerciful, a pastoral attitude or pastoral care is quickly used as a pretext.<sup>33</sup> This is an unjust interpretation, and it forces all those who work in the Church into permanent splits between what the Church says and what the Church does. Taking a pastoral stance, guided by “closeness, compassion, tenderness” and not changing anything about doctrine, initiates an unbearable tension and does not take away the pain that doctrine causes. Pastoral care is not the caregiver who should heal the wounds that doctrine inflicts. Good medicine is invested not only in coming up with new ways to properly care for wounds, but more importantly, in preventing wounds from occurring. The balancing act that a church community must perform anew in every age between its rich tradition, the People of God, and contemporary culture can only succeed if there is a balanced dynamic between pastoral care and doctrine. Pastoral care, then, is not a wipe to stop bleeding, but a partner led by the Gospel saying that it is high time that wounds are not inflicted. Any common discernment process will have to integrate the mutual dialogue between pastoral care and doctrine.

## 7. Conclusion

The Synod on the family in 2015 was a clear forerunner of the synodal path the pope wanted to take with the Church. It is striking how the pope, in further integrating synodality, was passed by the curia with a *responsum* that ignored the spirit of the synod.

Through its attitude, the Church denies the importance and value that people attach to having their relationship blessed within their faith tradition. The blessing of a relationship makes people feel that they belong, and that their love is seen as valuable and as a place where God can be found. The Church risks communicating through its prohibition that to receive a blessing you must earn it and not be in a sinful state. This is a denial of grace and mercy as the basis of any blessing.

The only way forward is to recognize homosexuality and homosexual relationships as a positive value within the Church community. In a common discernment process, the fundamental question that needs to be asked is: how is God actively present in all persons within their interconnected reality? Above all, church leaders, from a servant leadership perspective, need to prevent further wounds through inclusion rather than exclusion.

33. Anne Vandenhoeck, “Pastoraal is geen doekje voor het bloeden,” *Tertio* 16, no. 779 (2015): 13.

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