

Piotr Morciniec
Uniwersytet Opolski, Wydział Teologiczny
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6312-8296>

Discernment as the key to overcoming problems in marriage and family: roots, boundaries, and pastoral practice

Rozeznanie jako klucz do przewyżczania problemów małżeństwa i rodziny: korzenie, granice i praktyka duszpasterska

Abstract

Research context: The multifaceted crisis of the family, as well as the growing distance from institutionalizing partnerships, confirm the relevance of addressing the problems faced by lasting relationships between a man and a woman. However, diagnosis alone is insufficient, as it is essential to support the healthy functioning of the family both socially and scientifically.

Research aim: The approach identified by the Catholic Church as a significant antidote to the issues mentioned in the title appears to be a method known as discernment. Therefore, it was necessary to examine the usefulness and adequacy of this approach in working with marriages and families in crisis.

Research method: The research employed desk research, analyzing existing data with a focus on available studies on discernment. Special attention was given to statements and documents issued by the contemporary Promoter of the discernment approach, Pope Francis.

Achieved results: A critical analysis of the concept of discernment and an assessment of its practical usefulness confirmed the key role that discernment can play, if spouses engage with it, in the process of healing marital and family relationships. The universal application of this tool poses some difficulty, particularly given its religious dimension or character, but this can be partially addressed by appealing to the role of conscience as a universal “moral faculty” in humans.

Conclusions: Discernment is, or at least can be, an effective support for spouses who wish to overcome emerging problems, provided it is conducted properly as an interpersonal process.

Keywords: discernment, spiritual discernment, marital ethics, family, Ignatian spirituality, social teaching of the Church, "irregular situations", pastoral conversion.

Abstrakt:

Kontekst badań: Diagnozowany wieloaspektowo kryzys rodziny czy narastający dystans wobec instytucjonalizowania związków partnerskich potwierdzają zasadność pisania o problemach, z którymi boryka się trwały związek mężczyzny i kobiety. Sama jednak diagnoza jest niewystarczająca, ponieważ należy wspierać społecznie (i naukowo) dobre funkcjonowanie rodziny.

Cel badań: Narzędziem, które wskazywane jest przez Kościół katolicki jako znaczące antidotum na tytułowe problemy, wydaje się sposób podejścia określany jako rozeznawanie. Dlatego należało zbadać przydatność i adekwatność tego narzędzia w pracy z małżeństwami i rodzinami w kryzysie.

Metoda badawcza: W badaniach zastosowano desk research, a więc analizę danych zastanych, z uwzględnieniem dostępnych opracowań dotyczących rozeznawania, szczególną uwagę poświęcając wypowiedziom i dokumentom wydanym przez współczesnego Promotora podejścia rozeznającego, jakim jest papież Franciszek.

Osiągnięte wyniki: Krytyczna analiza samej koncepcji rozeznania i weryfikacja jej praktycznej przydatności potwierdziły kluczową rolę, jaką rozeznawanie może pełnić, jeżeli małżonkowie się do niego odwołają, w procesie zdrowienia relacji małżeńsko-rodzinnych. Pewną trudność stwarza uniwersalizacja tego narzędzia przy akcentowaniu jego religijnego wymiaru czy charakteru, ale można ją w jakieś mierze przezwyciężyć przez odwołanie do roli sumienia jako powszechnego „organu moralnego” u człowieka.

Wnioski: Rozeznawanie jest, a przynajmniej może być, skutecznym wsparciem dla małżonków, którzy chcą przezwyciężyć pojawiające się problemy, jeżeli jest ono właściwie przeprowadzane jako proces interpersonalny.

Słowa kluczowe: rozeznanie, rozeznawanie duchowe, etyka małżeńska, rodzina, duchowość ignacjańska, nauka społeczna Kościoła, „sytuacje nieregularne”, nawrócenie duszpasterskie.

The several years of discussion on the situation of the contemporary family, initiated by Pope Francis, encompassed a complex range of issues related

to this foundational community. The presentation of the *Instrumentum laboris* at the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops held in Rome in October 2014, along with the articulation of topics such as the Gospel of the family, pastoral challenges related to the family, and issues concerning the defense of life, highlights that the reflection on the family was intended to have a global scope. However, despite the awareness of the complexity of these issues, there was a noticeable and consistent focus during this period on certain key matters, with non-sacramental unions being among the most frequently raised (for a comprehensive analysis of the entire debate, see e.g., Kupczak, 2018, 2020). It is difficult today to determine whether this focus on selected specific issues was a deliberate manipulation or the result of media interest, primarily in controversial topics. A significant commentary on these trends was provided by Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti, President of the Italian Bishops' Conference, during the third symposium on *Amoris Laetitia*: "It is a text that must be read and reflected upon with great calm, without preconceived opinions, and above all without succumbing to some superficial interpretations that arose from the public debate, which, I feel, sometimes leaned more towards seeking sensationalism than toward an authentic reality of the facts" (KAI, 2018). Nevertheless, viewing the entire issue of the family solely through this lens would clearly distort it. Therefore, in analysis of the title problem, it is worthwhile to see the proposed key not only as a tool for adequately addressing the issue of non-sacramental unions (referred to as "irregular" in *Amoris Laetitia*) but also as a universal approach to facing the challenges encountered by contemporary marriages and families.

Considering the fact that the release of the exhortation was preceded by the Extraordinary General Assembly (2014) and the Ordinary General Assembly (2015) of the Synod of Bishops, and only in 2016 did Pope Francis issue the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, this entire sequence of events should be viewed holistically to draw appropriate conclusions regarding the Church's contemporary teaching on marriage and family. These events and statements by the Church must be complemented by Pope Francis's series of 14 catecheses dedicated to these issues, presented during his general audiences (August 31, 2022 – January 4, 2023) (Francis, 2023). This contribution represents merely an attempt at an analytical commentary on this particular issue. Beyond the question of understanding the concept of "discernment" itself (the term – used 50 times in *Amoris Laetitia* – is crucial to capturing its message, Polish Bishops' Conference, 2018), attention will focus on possible interpretations of this phenomenon from the perspective of questions about the moral good and evil of human actions, on the boundaries some commentators see in the application of discernment, and

will conclude with a comparison of Pope Francis's proposed path to the call for "pastoral conversion".

1. The presence of "discernment" in the discussion within the synods on the family

Proceeding to the analysis of the reality termed "discernment", it should be noted that this concept has been present in synodal work from the beginning of the preparations. In the *Relatio Synodi* of the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: "The pastoral challenges of the family in the context of new evangelization" (October 5–19, 2014), the term appears several times, starting with the description of the synodal experience verbalized by Pope Francis: "Simply being united around the Bishop of Rome is an event of grace, where episcopal collegiality is manifested in the process of spiritual and pastoral discernment" (The Synod of Bishops, 2014, no. 3). In this document, the Word of God is indicated as a tool for discernment, serving as a "criterion for assessment and a light for discerning the various challenges faced by spouses and families" (The Synod of Bishops, 2014, no. 34). All married couples are called to mature discernment of their vocation, which is Christian marriage, within the process of faith development (The Synod of Bishops, 2014, no. 36). This marks the conclusion of the application of discernment in regular marriage situations, while the subsequent three references to the need for its use relate to non-sacramental unions or so-called irregular marital situations.

In turn, the *Relatio Synodi* of the 2014 XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Pope Francis (October 24, 2015) referenced this key term, focusing on the issue of non-sacramental marriages (The Synod of Bishops, 2015, nos. 84–86). In the spirit of integrating those living in second (irregular) unions, it is necessary to avoid causing scandal by excluding them from the Christian community. The key to pastoral accompaniment for such individuals who are, after all, baptized and endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, is the logic of integration, which calls for "discerning which of the various forms of exclusion currently practiced in liturgical, pastoral, educational, and institutional fields can be overcome" (The Synod of Bishops, 2015, no. 84). Thus, discernment aims to include in the community of faith those previously excluded, even excommunicated, allowing them to live and feel as full members of the Church. An important doctrinal clarification is added after this invitation: "For the Christian community, care for these persons does not weaken its faith or testimony to the indissolubility of marriage", but rather expresses an attitude of mercy.

The proposal to open up to people in “irregular situations” had been criticized as allegedly weakening the truth of faith concerning the indissolubility of sacramental marriage.

It should not go unnoticed that in presenting the criterion for discernment in such situations, the teaching of St. John Paul II was cited: “Pastors must know that, for the love of truth, *they are obliged to discern properly the situation* [emphasis added – P.M.]. There is indeed a difference between those who have sincerely tried to save their first marriage and were unjustly abandoned, and those who have destroyed a canonically valid marriage through their own grave fault. Finally, there are those who have entered a new union for the sake of raising children, often with a subjectively certain conscience that their previous marriage, destroyed in an irreparable way, was never valid” (John Paul II, 1981, no. 84). Thus, pastors have a duty to “accompany the persons concerned in a process of discernment according to the Church’s teaching and the guidelines of the bishop. [...] Pastoral discernment [regarding the spouse’s responsibility – added P.M.], taking into account the properly formed conscience of individuals, must feel responsible for these situations” (The Synod of Bishops, 2015, no. 85). The *Relatio Synodi* 2015 also refers to the traditional teaching on imputability and individual responsibility (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edn, 2018, no. 1735), but as an essential complement notes that “the objective situation should not lead to judgment on subjective imputability” (Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, 2000, no. 2a). Therefore, the subjective responsibility of the person for an objectively morally wrong act is not always the same (Francis, 2016, no. 79).

The consequences of this distinction are evident, for instance, in the evolution of teachings on the actions of those who commit suicide. With advancements in psychological knowledge, a person who has taken their own life began to be evaluated not solely on the objective quality of the act (taking the life of an innocent person) but based on their subjective accountability. This approach in the synodal document is far from the media-distorted portrayal of complete freedom in discernment, a topic to which we shall return. Proper discernment, conducted in the dialogue with a pastor in the internal forum, aims to help the faithful in “irregular situations” understand their standing before God. This is a process of accompaniment and discernment that rejects the gradation of law but embraces the law of gradualness (Goleń, 2020, pp. 116–118), where a person “comes to know, love, and do moral good according to stages of personal growth” (John Paul II, 1981, no. 34; Francis, 2016, no. 295), and remembers that “discernment can never be detached from the demands of the Gospel’s truth and love as proposed by the Church” (The Synod of Bishops, 2015, no. 86).

The invocation of discernment as understood in synodal documents and in the teachings of Pope Francis is significant in that, on one hand, it confirms the shared intuition of the pope and the college of bishops that discernment is an essential tool in addressing issues of marriage and family. On the other hand, it highlights the influence of Pope Francis's spiritual and intellectual formation on the tone of the synodal discussions on the family. Let us therefore inquire about the roots and possible interpretations of the teaching on the key role of discernment in approaching this fundamental community of the Church.

2. Roots and possible interpretations of discernment

The attentive reader of *Amoris Laetitia* cannot overlook the fact that it does not provide ready-made canonical or casuistic solutions to complex issues in marital ethics: "... one should not expect ... from this exhortation a new set of general canonical norms that could be applied to all cases" (Francis, 2016, no. 300). As a proponent of a discerning approach, Pope Francis has chosen a path rooted in the Bible¹ and present for centuries in tradition, specifically the discernment of spirits or, more precisely, the "spiritual gift of discernment." Traditionally, the term "discernment of spirits" was used (see, for instance, Gallagher, 2018, who develops this theme creatively). This observation invites us to question the sources of the impulses that led Francis to follow this particular path.

When seeking the roots of inspiration for Pope Francis, the most obvious influence seems to be his Ignatian spiritual and intellectual formation (see Kotlewski, 2019 for further discussion). As a Jesuit, he encountered the teaching on the discernment of spirits from the beginning of his priestly path. This intuition is entirely justified, though it may also be an oversimplification. Therefore, it is worth identifying this as the first, though perhaps not the only, interpretive thread.

Undoubtedly, St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, is the father and creator of an original system of spiritual discernment based on the so-called spiritual exercises, which are spiritually close to Fr. Bergoglio. This spiritual connection has drawn criticism toward the pope. Critics "claimed that Francis muddied the Church's clear moral waters by promoting a concept that had landed St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, ... in prison: the idea that God can have direct contact with people" (Martin, 2016). It is impossible to cover the

¹ This is echoed in the clear text of St. John: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1).

entire concept here, but it is worth outlining the main components of spiritual discernment (Kwiatkowski, 2017), which Pope Francis advocates. Discernment considers the richness and complexity of human life and presupposes that God actively participates in the decision-making process: “The Creator deals directly with his creature” (St. Ignatius) (Martin, James, 2015). The goal of such discernment is to seek and find God’s will, not to gather reasons justifying a choice that has already been made, influenced by personal preferences and calculations. At this point, Francis’s critics seemed to overlook that the primary subject of discernment is God, “who speaks within man”, as the title of his Wednesday catecheses states.

Spiritual discernment, therefore, is not merely an intellectual exercise, though the use of reason is essential here in the sense of prudence. It cannot involve any form of transactional negotiation or calculation but must be solely a quest for God’s will. As a prerequisite, it demands the inner freedom of the discerners, so they are not, even unconsciously, driven by self-interest while claiming to seek God’s will. “In the spirit of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the examination of conscience is a practical path of spiritual discernment, through which one reads God’s callings.” Therefore, spiritual discernment and prayer form an inseparable pair in the quest to “seek and find God in all things” (“Ignatius prepares one for spiritual discernment through the *Spiritual Exercises*, which require time for prayer, reflection, meditation on the Word of God, silence, solitude, and openness to God’s work” Kotlewski, 2019, pp. 65–66). It is about recognizing God’s will and accepting it, even when spontaneous acceptance is lacking. The unspoken premise here is that discernment is only between good options; hence, the moral value of the act itself is also essential. In the case of the raised concerns regarding “irregular situations”, discernment was seen more as a subjective creation of an alternative reality, as if things were other than they actually are. Here, too, arose the temptation of “creative conscience” (see, e.g., Bortkiewicz, 2018, pp. 61–75), which has no place in genuine *spiritual* discernment. Since it is about spiritual discernment, it is crucial to rely on the assistance (illumination) of the Holy Spirit in this process, rather than reducing it to psychological terms.

In one of his Wednesday catecheses, the Pope presents Gamaliel (Acts 5:33–39) as a model of the proper attitude for discernment. Gamaliel speaks up and shows his brothers how to practice the art of discernment in situations that go beyond ordinary patterns. His courage and prudence led to right decisions, preventing bloodshed and harm. “Discernment does not offer standard solutions, as it is an art, a realization of the spiritual wisdom of God’s children, who learn to see traces of the Father’s presence in history” (eKAI, 2019), said Pope Francis. He added that discernment is an infused moral virtue, a gift of the Holy Spirit

(Kotlewski, 2019, p. 66), which is why he encourages Christians to pray for it both individually and as a community. This guidance poses a significant challenge for contemporary pastoral care, which should focus more on spiritual accompaniment rather than solely religious (cultic) activities. Therefore, pastors need a high level of spiritual maturity to avoid stopping at superficial emotions or remaining “scientifically rational”, as the essence of the spiritual discernment process includes a trans- or suprarational dimension – the manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

The importance of being guided by God in discernment is shown by the recommendation of the creator of the *Spiritual Exercises*, who advised not to close the matter entirely after making a spiritual discernment. St. Ignatius recommended returning to the Holy Spirit in a simple conversation with God, offering the entire matter under consideration, along with its outcome (the decision), to God. This was the final act of ensuring the authenticity of the choice made (Kwiatkowski, 2017).

In seeking other possible inspirations for papal teaching on discernment, one can look to Catholic social teaching, which was of great importance to Cardinal Bergoglio in Argentina and remains so for Pope Francis. It seems, therefore, that turning to the methodology of the Church’s social teaching to explore the roots of discernment – a methodology promoted by St. John XXIII in the Encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, in which he wrote: “The principles of social teaching are generally implemented in three successive stages: first, the actual state of affairs is examined; then, this state is carefully evaluated in light of these principles; and finally, decisions are made about what can and should be done to apply these principles in accordance with the circumstances of time and place. These three stages are sometimes expressed as: ‘observe, judge, act’” (John XXIII, 2003) – is highly appropriate. In fact, one Dominican author (Koniarek, 2019) proposes a similar approach to interpreting the principle of discernment, referring to the components of this method as “the three steps of discernment.” This line of thought also deserves attention, though it lies beyond the scope of this work.

Agreeing with the intuition of the author referenced, I suggest, however, paying attention to a very symptomatic fact. In constructing his pastoral response on the topic of love in the family, which was the exhortation, Pope Francis clearly used the method of Catholic social teaching, also known as pastoral methodology (sometimes genetically referred to as the “Cardinal Josef Cardijn paradigm” (Przygoda, 2009, pp. 33–36). The first step (to see, to observe) was expanded to an unprecedented scale, encompassing consultations literally from around the world. The publication of the exhortation was preceded by two synods of bishops, and beyond that, an extraordinary preparatory step took place: for the first

time before a synod, the faithful were asked for their opinion. This extended preparation and consultation of the faithful stemmed from the conviction that the magisterial role of bishops and the pope should – before it becomes a teaching office – be a “listening office.”

The results of a careful examination of reality proved striking and found their reflection in the content of *Amoris Laetitia*. In this perspective, the family “stretches” between two extremes. On one hand, “(...) there is no stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging collage made up of many different realities, filled with joys, dramas, and dreams. The realities that trouble us are challenges” (Francis, 2016, no. 57). On the other hand, “to avoid any misunderstanding, it must be kept in mind that the Church in no way can renounce proposing the full ideal of marriage, God’s plan in all its grandeur” (Francis, 2016, no. 307).

The conclusions from this comprehensive observation led to the next step (to judge), which Francis shaped as the exhortation, neither ignoring difficult topics nor avoiding to propose concrete solutions. However, two points are worth noting here. First, the Pope’s painful admission regarding past erroneous practices toward families within the Church. The Pope highlighted this approach, which later aggressively criticized the exhortation: “For a long time we thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical, and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families, strengthening the bond of marriage, and filling their shared life with meaning. [...] We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them” (Francis, 2016, no. 37). Despite potential misunderstandings or risks of misinterpreting these words, they hold much truth about the needs of families and the role of pastors.

As a result of his in-depth observation, Pope Francis places marital joy within the context of mercy, suggesting that the proper perspective lies in a pastoral approach with mercy toward marital love in all its forms, even those that are deeply imperfect. It is noteworthy that Francis considers the “perfect family” to be consumerist propaganda (Francis, 2016, no. 135), while he addresses each real expression of closeness between two people with great love. This attitude helps to understand the unique and courageous message filled with care for real families.

The statements on discernment from the much-contested Chapter VIII sound like a programmatic appeal: “there is a need to avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situations” and “to be attentive, by

necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition” (Francis, 2016, no. 296). In this context, the words seem like a justification: “The choice of a civil marriage or, in many cases, of simple cohabitation, is often not motivated by prejudice or resistance to a sacramental union, but by cultural or contingent situations” (Francis, 2016, no. 294). From the perspective Pope Francis outlines, it becomes easier to understand the recommendation to consider moral teachings on subjective moral guilt and to appreciate the significance of obstacles when assessing the real situation of an individual and family.

In this second step, one should also appreciate Pope Francis’s solid ethical formation, as he does not bypass the anthropological step before formulating value judgments. The common (naturalistic) mistake of drawing normative conclusions solely from facts is avoided in the exhortation, as the Pope precedes such conclusions with a presentation of a rich anthropological vision (marital love and fertility) and a theological one, which provide the proper foundation for setting expectations. This approach, beginning with “the human” as they are and as they have the potential to become, placing them in the light of God’s Word and calling – before God – fulfills the requirements of true spiritual discernment.

The third step in the method of Catholic social teaching (to act) is fulfilled in Chapters VI–IX of the exhortation from various perspectives. These guidelines also emerge from a spirit of mercy, dialogue, and respect for every individual. They will not be expanded on here, as the final section of this text will conceptually address them with a proposal for updating based on more recent writings by Pope Francis. The emphasis will be on the pastoral and spiritual dimension, as intended by the Pope. However, we will first address the issue of limitations in practicing discernment.

3. The limits of discernment in “irregular situations”

Following the discussion around the *Amoris Laetitia* exhortation, one could sometimes get the impression that the only issue Pope Francis addressed was the admission of people in “irregular situations” to sacramental Communion. This narrow perspective led to attempts to overlook the fact that these individuals had entered into valid sacramental marriages. Such a limited view of the Pope’s teaching not only hindered the reception of the exhortation but also greatly diminished the positive catechesis on the value of marriage and family. Therefore, Archbishop Chaput, who chaired the American bishops’ committee on interpreting this document, rightly emphasizes two key points. First, the Church’s mis-

sion is to reach people in their real situations and accompany them, including in marriage and family life. However, on the other hand, the Church must remain faithful to the truth, which means that in discernment, it must guide people honestly, speaking the truth in love (Chaput, 2017). From these facts arises the need to define the limits of discernment.

Archbishop Paglia, president of the Pontifical Academy for Life and former president of the Pontifical Council for the Family, aptly points out in this context that neither the Pope nor the Synod of Bishops issued any legal directives regarding Communion for the divorced. Therefore, looking for a sensational change in Church teaching leads to a dead end. The breakthrough introduced by *Amoris Laetitia* concerns the very style of pastoral care, which should resemble a family. In the light of the document, there is no room for arbitrary action, but rather discernment, accompaniment, and integration. Some justification for the excessive focus on Communion for those in “irregular situations” can be found in the famous footnote 351, which “could have caused pastoral challenges” (Paglia, 2017). All these statements merely confirm what was previously mentioned about Francis’s understanding of discernment.

The Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, Cardinal Marc Ouellet, speaking on the limits of discernment in “irregular situations,” stated that there are “cases where it is necessary to examine whether the marriage was valid. Sometimes we encounter people who, although divorced long ago, have not analysed their situation, and it can be examined. In such cases, discernment is certainly possible. However, in situations where the validity of the marriage is not in doubt and someone has entered a second union, their life is in contradiction with the sacramental mystery of marriage. And this is a boundary that cannot be crossed. The Church’s tradition has maintained this boundary, and *Amoris Laetitia* has not changed it” (Ouellet, 2016).

4. The perspective of pastoral discernment

Addressing the most delicate issues of human existence “sets us in the context of a pastoral discernment filled with merciful love, which is ever ready to understand, forgive, accompany, hope, and above all integrate” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 312), the Pope declares. This statement directs the practice of discernment to focus primarily on the pastoral and spiritual dimensions. This intuition is confirmed by Pope Francis’s Wednesday catecheses on discernment as well as statements from selected Church institutions. Pope Francis emphasized this particular understanding of discernment in his exhortation on the call to holiness.

“Today, the attitude of discernment has become especially necessary” (Francis, 2018, no. 167), meaning discernment as a way of life, not merely a one-time act. The Jesuit Pope does not hesitate to state that discernment is the only way to recognize whether something comes from God, from the world, or from the devil (Francis, 2018, no. 166), elevating spiritual discernment to the level of essential equipment for every Christian and ultimately, every person, since this posture should not be limited to a recommendation for pastors alone.

This general appeal is then specified in describing situations that require discernment. Francis points to two scenarios: the emergence of novelty and tendencies toward conservatism. Particularly in the second case, his explanation can be related to the teachings of *Amoris Laetitia*, where “the forces of evil urge us not to change, to leave things as they are, to choose stagnation or rigidity. Then we prevent the inspirations of the Holy Spirit from acting” (Francis, 2018, no. 168). This is both an encouragement to recognize the signs of the times and to be guided by the Holy Spirit, who knows the path to the full freedom of the children of God. It should be acknowledged that Francis viewed the “old forms of pastoral care for families” as stagnant and overly rigid, and so – empowered by the Spirit – he proposed a new style of pastoral care (see discussion in Olszewski, 2018, pp. 119–134).

The Pope confirmed this in another passage of his exhortation on holiness, emphasizing themes similar to those in *Amoris Laetitia*. Specifically, he states: “Spiritual discernment does not exclude the contributions of human, existential, psychological, sociological, or moral knowledge. However, it transcends them. Nor are the Church’s wise principles sufficient. We must always remember that discernment is a grace. Although it involves reason and prudence, it surpasses them, for it seeks to perceive the unique and unrepeatable plan that God has for each person, realized within the most varied contexts and limitations” (Francis, 2018, no. 170). It seems critics of the teachings in *Amoris Laetitia* have underestimated the programmatic nature of this document. The Pope is not aiming to change the Church’s principles (teachings) but insists on a new approach to interpreting them with a renewed regard for each person, to “accompany, discern, and integrate the fragile”, as he declares in the title of Chapter VIII of *Amoris Laetitia*. God is greater than the wisest human reflections and judgments, capable of writing clear challenges to holiness upon the crooked lines of human (marital) life stories, full of weakness and limitations.

Anyone wishing to attribute revolutionary tendencies to Francis, as some left-wing groups have attempted, would likely be disappointed. After calling for discernment through prayer and examination of conscience, he urges obedience to the Gospel (as the ultimate criterion), but also obedience to the Magisterium

to apply the Church's wisdom fruitfully toward personal salvation (Cygański, 2020, p. 151). However, a key passage clarifies Francis's teaching: "It is not about applying rules or repeating the past, because the same solutions are not always appropriate in every circumstance, and what was useful in one context may not be helpful in another" (Francis, 2018, no. 173). This is neither more nor less than questioning moral norms and principles as absolutely binding and instead considering their application within situations, circumstances, and (as Francis phrases it) "contexts." This sheds light on accusations that the Pope promotes situational ethics, where circumstances and the subject's intentions take precedence over an objective evaluation of the act itself. However, these critics often overlook Francis's core message: this is not about dismantling morality but "seeing with the eyes of God in Jesus Christ," who knows the full truth of human life, including the subjective component of human action. It is crucial to emphasize that this refers to the subjective factor, rooted in and originating from the person, not a subjectivist approach, which implies arbitrary personal preferences or moral-sacramental autonomy.

The Pope affirms this intuition, viewing discernment as a tool of mercy for sinners: "The discernment of spirits liberates us from rigidity, which has no place before the perennial "today" of the risen Lord. The Spirit alone can penetrate what is obscure and hidden in every situation, and grasp its every nuance, so that the newness of the Gospel can emerge in another light." (Francis, 2018, no. 173). This is the essence of the call to "see deeper," to see with God's perspective. Given this, it's appropriate to ask what role does Francis envisage for pastors, as well as for the community of believers?

Barbara Kmiecik proposes the term "accompaniment in discernment" as an essential task of a pastor or spiritual director, noting that alongside discernment, accompaniment is a key term in *Amoris Laetitia*, appearing over 200 times (Kmiecik, 2017, p. 109). This accompaniment "in the broader sense refers to various pastoral activities aimed at preparing and supporting marriages and families. In the more specific, individual sense, accompaniment applies to situations requiring greater sensitivity and discretion" (Kmiecik, 2017, p. 110). The essence of accompaniment in discernment is to support the spiritual growth of the person seeking truth, longing to hear God's call, and striving to be reborn into truth (Sagne, 2008, p. 8).

In attempting to interpret Pope Francis' message on discernment, it is essential to consider the document from the Congregation for the Clergy on the "pastoral conversion of the parish community" (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016), which reflects the shifts in approach to individuals, particularly those who are lost, translating these ideas into pastoral practice. Francis' call for conversion,

sustained by ongoing discernment, is a profoundly ecclesial proposal, yet its primary source lies in the Scripture, vividly illustrated by Jesus' journey with the disciples to Emmaus or by the various actions taken by the Apostles as described in the Acts of the Apostles (Koniarek, 2019).

If *Evangelii Gaudium* is regarded as a programmatic document for Pope Francis' pontificate, it is unsurprising that he advocates for a Church that is "bruised, hurting, and dirty," one that seeks out the lost, rather than one that is comfortable and closed off. In it, he expresses his shock and distress that "so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them," and he hopes that as a community of believers, we will be guided by "the fear of remaining shut up within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe" (Francis, 2013, no. 49). The practical implementation of this mission addressed to families is found in *Amoris Laetitia* and the Wednesday catecheses, with pastoral fulfillment in the instruction mentioned earlier.

Finally, it is worth highlighting a section of this document that provides the (doctrinal) foundation for the solutions based on discernment adopted in the exhortation on family love. It refers to the ecclesiological truth that "the Holy People faithful to God are anointed with the grace of the Holy Spirit; therefore, in the process of reflection, evaluation, and discernment, we must be very attentive to this anointing. Whenever we, as the Church, as shepherds, as consecrated persons, forget this truth, we follow the wrong path" (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016, no. 37). From this conviction arises the mandate to accompany in discernment rather than deciding on behalf of people in various complex situations. In the spirit of integration and inclusion, each person has the right to respect for their guidance by the Holy Spirit, and discernment is not reserved for "specialists" but should be the work of a well-formed conscience.

The perspective above, however, highlights a significant challenge inherently linked to Pope Francis's concept of discernment. The openness to every person and every family, especially those who are weak and lost, should enable the universalization of this model, its application to every family and every individual. However, since a *sine qua non* condition of discernment is its religious dimension, specifically in the Christian sense, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit and in the power of the Risen Christ, non-believers or those of "different faith" may seem excluded from living this attitude. A potential key to broadening the circle of those practicing discernment could be to describe it as "God's voice in the heart" (the subtitle of Pope Francis's Wednesday catecheses), as highlighted by Giacomo Costa SJ, author of the Introduction to the Catecheses. He points out

that proper interpretation of reality involves three stages: recognition – interpretation – choice, which relate to “the reality and depth of the human heart, where the good and evil spirits operate. Therefore, it becomes essential to consider the role of conscience, the place of encounter and dialogue with the inner Master (Glombik, 2023, p. 34), which helps avoid the temptation to hide behind rigid norms or an idealized image of freedom” (Francis, 2013, no. 13). Referencing the fundamental role of the heart (conscience), which “must be listened to” (Francis, 2013, no. 31), in line with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council (“Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. ... In his conscience, man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey”; (Pope Paul VI, 1965, no. 16), seems to broaden and allow for the universalization of the concept of discernment. Conscience, as the “place of encounter between God and the person,” becomes an instance that allows truth to be voiced regarding the good and evil in human acts of each person, regardless of their professed religious beliefs. This “moral sense” thus permits an expanded interpretation of discernment, which the Pope describes as “intimacy with the Lord,” viewing it as a reflection of the goodness inherent in the human person whom God created as “good” and who, by nature, longs for goodness. Therefore, “self-knowledge,” or the discernment of one’s human dimension – both cognitive and emotional – is recognized as an essential component of discernment, concretized in the examination of conscience seen as a self-reflection leading to growth in freedom (Francis, 2013, nos. 44–49, 64).

In the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis wrote about four attitudes (criteria) that should characterize every Church activity: welcome, accompany, discern, and integrate. Among these attitudes, discernment plays a crucial role. The perspective emphasized by discernment is the understanding that God desires to help us in making decisions, and we can hear His voice if we listen attentively to our hearts (our conscience). Recognizing the Pope’s voice as prophetic, we can hope that practicing the attitude of discernment will contribute to the renewal and strengthening of marital and family life, while aiding the Church as a community of believers in its pastoral conversion.

Translated: Michalina Trybuś

Data wpłynięcia: 2023-02-14;

Data uzyskania pozytywnych recenzji: 2024-10-15;

Data przesłania do druku: 2024-12-18.

References:

- Bortkiewicz, P. (2018) 'Kreatywne sumienie w Amoris laetitia?', *Teologia i Moralność*, 13(1(23)), pp. 61–75. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.14746/tim.2018.23.1.4>.
- Chaput, C. (2017) Abp Chaput wyjaśnia, jak interpretować Amoris laetitia, Fundacja Opoka. Available at: <https://opoka.org.pl/News/Swiat/2017/abp-chaput-wyjasnia-jak-interpretowac-amoris-laetitia> (Accessed: 11 June 2024).
- Cygański, A. (2020) 'Duszpasterskie rozeznawanie wspólnotowe. Od rozeznawania wspólnotowego do wspólnoty rozeznającej', *Polonia Sacra*, 24(3), pp. 147–162. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.15633/ps.3729>.
- eKAI (2019) 'Audiencja generalna papieża Franciszka (16 października 2019)', eKAI | Portal Katolickiej Agencji Informacyjnej, 16 October. Available at: <https://www.ekai.pl/dokumenty/audiencja-generalna-papieza-franciszka-16-pazdziernika-2019/> (Accessed: 17 June 2024).
- Franciszek (2013) „*Evangelii Gaudium*”. Adhortacja Apostolska o głoszeniu Ewangelii w dzisiejszym świecie (24 listopada 2013 r.). Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/pl/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (Accessed: 11 June 2024).
- Franciszek (2016) „Amoris laetitia”. Posynodalna Adhortacja apostolska o miłości w rodzinie (19 marca 2016 r.). Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/pl/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html (Accessed: 11 June 2024).
- Franciszek (2018) „Gaudete et exsultate”. O powołaniu do świętości w świecie współczesnym (19 marca 2018 roku). Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/pl/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html (Accessed: 11 June 2024).
- Franciszek (2023) *Rozeznawanie: Boży głos w sercu*. Kraków: WAM.
- Gallagher, T.M. (2018) *Rozeznawanie duchów: św. Ignacy uczy jak świadomie kroczyć przez życie*. 2018th edn. Translated by M. Chojnacki. Kraków: WAM.
- Glombik, K.J. (2023) 'Amoris laetitia jako odpowiedź na współczesne wyzwania związane z małżeństwem i rodziną', *Studia Bobolanum*, 34(2), pp. 23–43. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0053.7043>.
- Goleń, J. (2020) 'Towarzyszenie, rozeznawanie i integracja osób w nieuregulowanych sytuacjach małżeńskich', in K. Glombik, J. Goleń, and A. Nadbrzeżny (eds) *Droga miłosierdzia i integracji w adhortacji Amoris laetitia. Perspektywa dogmatyczna, moralna i pastoralna*. Lublin: TN KUL JP II (Prace Wydziału Teologii – Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II, 207), pp. 113–164.
- Jan Paweł II (1981) *Familiaris consortio*. Adhortacja Apostolska o zadaniach rodziny w świecie współczesnym (22.11.1981), Fundacja Opoka. Available at: https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WP/jan_pawel_ii/adhortacje/familiaris (Accessed: 11 June 2024).

- Jan XXIII (2003) *Mater et Magistra*. Encyklika o współczesnych przemianach społecznych w świetle nauki chrześcijańskiej (15.05.1961), Fundacja Opoka. Available at: https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WP/jan_xxiii/encykliki/mater_magistra_15051961 (Accessed: 11 June 2024).
- KAI (2018) Kard. Basetti o 'Amoris laetitia': nie ulegajmy wpływom naskórkowych interpretacji (11.11.2017), DEON.pl. Available at: <https://deon.pl/kosciol/serwis-papieski/kard-basetti-o-amoris-laetitia-nie-ulegajmy-wplywom-naskorkowych-interpretacji,458198> (Accessed: 11 June 2024).
- Katechizm Kościoła Katolickiego. 2nd edn (2018). Poznań: Pallottinum.
- Kmieciak, B. (2017) 'Towarzystwo duchowe małżonkom i osobom w sytuacjach nieregularnych w świetle adhortacji Amoris laetitia', *Family Forum*, 7, pp. 107–124. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.25167/FF/2017/107-124>.
- Konferencja Episkopatu Polski (2018) Wytyczne pastoralne do adhortacji *Amoris Laetitia* (08.06.2018), Fundacja Opoka. Available at: https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WE/kep/wytyczne_amoris_08062018 (Accessed: 11 June 2024).
- Kongregacja ds. Duchowieństwa (2016) 'Instrukcja Nawrócenie duszpasterskie wspólnoty parafialnej w służbie misji ewangelizacyjnej Kościoła', eKAI | Portal Katolickiej Agencji Informacyjnej, 8 December. Available at: <https://www.ekai.pl/dokumenty/instrukcja-nawrocenie-duszpasterskie-wspolnoty-parafialnej-w-sluzbie-misji-ewangelizacyjnej-kosciola/> (Accessed: 17 June 2024).
- Koniarek, P. (2019) Rozeznawać z Franciszkiem, czyli ewangeliczna zasada w praktyce. Available at: <https://wiesz.pl/2019/06/19/rozeznowac-z-franciszkiem-czyli-ewangeliczna-zasada-w-praktyce/> (Accessed: 11 June 2024).
- Kotlewski, T. (2019) 'Ignacjańskie korzenie duchowości papieża Franciszka', *Studia Bobolanum*, 30(3), pp. 59–70. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.30439/SB.2019.3.3>.
- Kupczak, J. (2018) Źródła sporu o Amoris laetitia. Poznań: W Drodze.
- Kupczak, J. (2020) Amoris laetitia. Konflikt interpretacji. Poznań: W Drodze.
- Kwiatkowski, Z. (2017) Papież wzywa do rozeznawania duchowego. Co to znaczy?, DEON.pl. Available at: <https://deon.pl/kosciol/komentarze/papiez-wzywa-do-rozeznowania-duchowego-co-to-znaczy,470648> (Accessed: 15 June 2024).
- Martin, J. (2016) What some critics of 'Amoris Laetitia' are missing, *America Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/what-some-critics-amoris-laetitia-are-missing> (Accessed: 15 June 2024).
- Martin, James (2015) Klucz do zrozumienia sposobu działania Franciszka, DEON.pl. Available at: <https://deon.pl/kosciol/komentarze/klucz-do-zrozumienia-sposobu-dzialania-franciszka,400556> (Accessed: 15 June 2024).
- Olszewski, M. (2018) 'Wzrost w świętości poprzez rozeznawanie. Refleksja w świetle adhortacji apostołskiej „Gaudete et exsultate” papieża Franciszka', *Perspectiva*, 17(2 (33)), pp. 119–134.

- Ouellet, M. (2016) Kard. Ouellet o rozeznaniu po *Amoris Laetitia*: Są granice. Available at: <https://info.wiara.pl/doc/3505909.Kard-Ouellet-o-rozeznaniu-po-Amoris-Laetitia-Sa-granice> (Accessed: 15 June 2024).
- Paglia, V. (2017) Abp Paglia o 'Amoris laetitia': nie dla błogosławienia ran, DEON.pl. Available at: <https://deon.pl/kosciol/abp-paglia-o-amoris-laetitia-nie-dla-blogoslawienia-ran,434258> (Accessed: 17 June 2024).
- Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts (2000) Declaration II. Concerning the Admission to Holy Communion of Faithful Who Are Divorced And Remarried. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/intrptxt/documents/rc_pc_intrptxt_doc_20000706_declaration_en.html (Accessed: 15 June 2024).
- Pope Paul VI (1695) Pastoral constitution on the church in the modern world "Gaudium et spes" promulgated by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (Accessed: 28 July 2024).
- Przygoda, W. (2009) 'Paradygmaty metodologiczne we współczesnej teologii pastoralnej', *Teologia Praktyczna*, 10, pp. 31–43.
- Sagne, J.-C. (2008) *Towarzyszenie duchowe*. Translated by K. Kubaszczyk. Poznań: W drodze.
- The Synod of Bishops (2014) *Relatio Synodi*. "Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization" (18 October 2014). Available at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141018_relatio-synodi-familia_en.html (Accessed: 17 June 2024).
- The Synod of Bishops (2015) The Final Report of the Synod of Bishops to the Holy Father, Pope Francis. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20151026_relazione-finale-xiv-assemblea_en.html (Accessed: 17 June 2024).