

ANNA ABRAM

Heythrop College, University of London

Pastoral discernment, imagination and *ekphrases* in Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia*

1. What is (pastoral) discernment? – 2. *Ekphrases* and the role of imagination in pastoral discernment – 3. Conclusions

This paper will examine the notions of “discernment” and “pastoral discernment” in Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia*¹. It will attempt to find out what Pope Francis means by his frequently used term “discernment” and how he sees the role of discernment in the lives of individuals and as an ecclesial practice. I shall argue that Pope Francis in this document reclaims imagination as an important tool for pastoral discernment.

On the day of the publication of *Amoris laetitia* Nicholas Austin, in the Jesuit online magazine “Thinking Faith”, suggested that one of the important achievements of this exhortation is that it “transposes church teaching on marriage and the family from the key of law to that of virtue”². Austin warned that

anyone looking for a “progressive” or “liberal” pope will feel as let-down as those hoping for a straight forward reaffirmation of the *status quo*³.

¹ FRANCIS, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “Amoris laetitia”*, Vatican 2016 (abbreviated as AL).

² N. AUSTIN, “*Discernment charged with merciful love*”: Pope Francis’ *Amoris laetitia*, on *Love in the Family*, “Thinking Faith”, 8 April 2016. <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/discernment-charged-merciful-love-pope-francis%E2%80%99-amoris-laetitia-love-family-0> (24.10. 2016).

³ *Ibid.*

Pope Francis seems keen to move beyond our current “polarisation” discourse. According to Austin Pope Francis “transcends the lazy polarities” and “resists viewpoints that cling too tightly only to one side of the truth”⁴. The Pope seems to want us to view things differently and treat discernment seriously.

The language of the exhortation is quite revealing. A quick search of eighteen key terms and frequency of their appearance paints an interesting picture of the conceptual framework with which the Pontiff seems to operate (see the table below).

Discernment – 33	Conscience – 14	Mercy – 35
Image/Imagery/Imagination – 20	Law – 25	Love – ca. 400
Look/looking – 37	Sin – 17/ Sinner 5	Tenderness – 15
See/seeing – ca. 80	Evil – 26 (= overcoming evil)	Experience – 90
Gaze – 10	Rule – 20	Attention – 15
View – 15	Intrinsic – 2 (bond and value) – no negative, prohibitive contexts	Joy (including enjoy, enjoyment and joyful) – 75

Love is the most frequently used term. “Experience” and “tenderness” appear recurrently too. The word “discernment” is used thirty three times while “rule” only twenty. There is an abundance of words related to vision such as “seeing”, “looking”, and “gazing”. The term “instruction” is used only once (in the context of the education of children). The language is more open and somewhat tentative in comparison with other Church documents on similar themes. Pope Francis invites us to re-visit and re-imagine several familiar categories, including the notion of decision making and urges us to practice discernment. But, what exactly is discernment? To this question we shall turn next.

⁴ *Ibid.*

1. What is (pastoral) discernment?

For Pope Francis – shaped by Ignatian spirituality (in which discernment is a core spiritual practice) – discernment is second nature. He alludes to it in interviews, speeches and writing. For example, in an interview with Antonio Spadaro SJ, he describes discernment as a practice in which the senses play an important role – it is something that is

always done in the presence of the Lord, looking at the signs, listening to the things that happen, the feeling of the people, especially the poor⁵.

Austin, himself a Jesuit, confirms this view when he explains that discernment is

something that is known more by practice than book knowledge: it is a more personal and spiritual form of insight, one that requires the virtues of attentiveness, empathy and love, and which develops a feel for the action of the Holy Spirit in human experience⁶.

Contemporary scholars emphasize practice, personal experience, and emotions as core elements of discernment. The works of William Spohn, James Gustafson and Edward Vacek are particularly illuminating for grasping the message of Pope Francis. Spohn and Vacek represent the Ignatian tradition, Gustafson is a protestant theologian. Spohn in his paper *The Reasoning Heart* defines discernment as the

skill of moral evaluation in the concrete. It employs symbolic and affective criteria to accomplish this evaluation. (...) It goes beyond the question “Is this action morally right?” to the more personal questions of appropriateness: “Is this action consistent with who I am and want to become? What sort of person does this type of action?” Abstractions are less helpful than the «resources of memory and imagination⁷.

Although Spohn speaks of discernment as the “reasoning heart” he is careful not to set it in opposition to the “reasoning head” (more abstract reasoning with general moral principles). For him, discernment operates within the boundaries set by such

⁵ A. SPADARO, *A Big Heart Open to God*, “Thinking Faith” (19 September 2013), https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20130919_1.htm.

⁶ N. AUSTIN, “*Discernment charged with merciful love*”.

⁷ W.C. SPOHN, *The Reasoning Heart: An American Approach to Christian Discernment*, “Theological Studies” 44 (1983), p. 30.

general principles as justice but primarily it attends to the particular situation of the person. However, the fact that discernment is personal does not mean it is private. We need judgments of rationality “to set the boundary conditions for action and to provide reasons for conduct which are publicly intelligible”⁸. So, principles set boundaries for discernment but what does exactly guide discernment in concrete situations?

According to Spohn, it is the symbols which guide evaluation of the concrete situations. He relies on Karl Rahner’s and Richard Niebuhr’s works in exploring the relevant symbols and metaphors (from very broad themes such as harmony, peace, satisfaction to concrete stories which are a symbolic part of Christian identity such as the story of Abraham/Isaac or Jesus’ parables). Spohn warns that in working with the symbols we are in danger of a narrow reading. So, while concentrating on the particular we should have in mind the whole. Spohn contrasts (as does Pope Francis) certain forms of narrowly perceived parochialism with genuine faith in Christ and its Christian commitment to a more universal community. For him, defensiveness is a major threat to the responsible life, and discernment seeks to be responsible to a wider social context by the aid of the symbols or images with which they shape individual self-understanding.

This wider (community) context and the self somehow should fit together:

[d]iscernment operates by fitting the part into a whole which illuminates the significance of the part⁹.

Spohn finds inspiration in Niebuhr who captures well the relationship between the part and the whole when he says:

We seek to have them [the parts] fit into the whole as a sentence fits into a paragraph in a book, a note into a chord in a movement in a symphony, as the act of eating a common meal fits into the lifelong companionship of a family, as the decision of a statesman fits into the ongoing movement of his nation’s life with other nations, or as the discovery of a scientific artefact fits into the history of science¹⁰.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 31.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 40.

¹⁰ H.R. NIEBUHR, *Responsible Self. An Essay on Christian Moral Philosophy*, Westminster 1999, p. 97.

For Spohn,

[d]iscernment seeks the disclosure of the whole in the part¹¹;
[t]he disclosure of the whole in the part comes to the participant in faith, to the reasoning heart which looks for revelation and is willing to be instructed by it¹².

Spohn tells us that there are two closely connected questions that are crucial for discernment: “Who am I?” and “What is going on?” How does one connect these two questions? Spohn warns us that one does not easily move between these two questions; when we try to answer the second question “what is going on?” we have not simply left the standpoint of the participant for the standpoint of the objective dispassionate observer. If we want to answer the second question (“what is going on”) we necessarily refer to events around us. In his view, “there can be no single objective description of events which exhausts their meaning”:

[t]o understand events, realities which occur in our experience, we need to complement the reasoning head with the reasoning heart¹³.

Spohn explains that evaluation of events (in discernment) is done from different angles so that they somehow make sense, regardless of the angle from which they are viewed. He is keen to suggest that

[e]vents cannot be dissected to find their causes;
[t]heir meaning is not readily available for public inspection, like the ingredients listed on the label of a can¹⁴.

To give an example what he means by this rather complex way of reading the events and connecting the two questions, Spohn refers to St. Paul and his ministry which was viewed by his opponents in Corinth as a series of failures. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians Paul offers his own interpretation of the events in Asia:

Brothers, we do not wish to leave you in the dark about the trouble we had in Asia: we were crushed beyond our strength, even to the point of despairing of life. We were

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 40.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 41.

¹³ W.C. SPOHN, *The Reasoning Heart*, p. 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

left to feel like men condemned to death, so that we might trust not in ourselves but in God who raises from the dead. He rescued us from the danger of death and will continue to do so (2Cor 1:8-10).

Paul reverses the charges of his critics and implies that his sufferings are rather credits for his ministry and not proof of his failures:

Therefore I am content with weakness, with mistreatment, with distress, with persecutions and difficulties for the sake of Christ; for when I am powerless, it is then that I am strong (1Cor 12:10).

When interpreted in the light of Christ's death and resurrection, these same facts seem to amount to a different meaning.

Another example that Spohn offers is the interpretation of the events of the Second World War by Niebuhr who (similarly to St. Paul) performed one of these symbolic readings of public events. He was asking: "What is God doing in the war?" and was answering this question by appealing to biblical symbols of divine judgment and the crucifixion. He concluded that

God was on neither side in the war and was judging all parties for their self-interest and self-righteousness. The scandal of innocent suffering of millions who were caught between the great armies could be meaningful only when seen in the context of Jesus Christ's vicarious suffering¹⁵.

Apparently, Niebuhr's question as well as his answer to it offended many who protested that the loving God could only grieve over human sinfulness in war. "Niebuhr insisted that God must be doing something in every event, even in the most tragic"¹⁶. Spohn suggests that to be truly responsible in faith, Christians need to imitate Jesus in "seeking out the hidden divine intention by locating even destructive events in the context of God's creating, redeeming, and judging activity"¹⁷.

As these examples demonstrate, reading the events and connecting the two questions ("Who am I?" and "What is going on?") might not be straight forward. However, what is important is that God and God's presence in the events are

¹⁵ W.C. SPOHN, *The Reasoning Heart*, p. 43. See Spohn's reference to NIEBUHR, *War as Crucifixion*, "The Christian Century" 60 (1943), p. 513-515.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 42.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

brought to the picture of discernment. Despite the destructiveness and difficulties in the events, we must try to find God in the smallest speckle of human reality. What if we apply Niebuhr's question to the events today: what is God doing in the global conflicts of today, in the family lives and relationships around the world, in the suffering of children, in Brexit and Trump's America? How to discern well in the context of these realities. When answering the question "what is going on?" we must not restrict ourselves to one view. Spohn thinks that if we restrict our discussion to the judgment based on one rational theory or the rules imposed by an authority (including the Church), we may not be able to ask and answer properly this fundamental question. He suggests that when answering such fundamental questions as the ones we have been posing we must pay attention to emotions – they are significant for the evaluation of events. We have already noted that Pope Francis stresses the same point. Spohn draws our attention to the fact that the story of Jesus not only discloses symbols which are there to help us in the process of discernment but in the story of Jesus we find a specific set of affections which complement the symbols. Spohn clarifies that these affections are not "transitory feelings or unfathomable moods"; they are deep "convictions of the reasoning heart which dispose the moral agent to act in definite ways"¹⁸. His set of affections include: hope, self-surrender, self-emptying, love, meekness, quietness, forgiveness, and mercy as they appeared in Jesus¹⁹.

James Gustafson, in his approach to discernment, also talks about the importance of affections. He refers to them as "senses of the heart" and they include: a sense of radical dependence, of gratitude, repentance, obligation, possibility, and direction²⁰. Gustafson sees discernment as the "ability to distinguish the important information from the unimportant and the uninsightful interpretation from the insightful"²¹. In a similar way to Spohn, Gustafson refers to the relationship between the part and the whole though he puts it slightly differently, with more focus on information and imagination. For him, the part and the whole might not fit together. He sees discernment as the

ability to perceive relationships between aspects of the information that enables one to see how it all fits together, or how it cannot fit together. It refers to the ability to

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 46.

¹⁹ Spohn explores these affections though he does not define love; love resists definition, because it demands the person totally, not only in particular actions. See *ibid*, p. 46.

²⁰ J.M. GUSTAFSON, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* Chicago 1975, p. 92.

²¹ J.M. GUSTAFSON, *Theology and Christian Ethics*, Philadelphia 1974, p. 104.

suggest inferences that can be drawn from the information, and thus to an imaginative capacity²².

This imaginative capacity, according to Gustafson (and Spohn too) is necessary for seeing and discriminating what genuinely fits in with the sense of self and the self's context ("what is going on" around the self, both locally and globally). Christian symbols and affections nourish and mobilise imagination and help the discerner to figure out what God wants them to do. Perhaps the role of imagination in discernment is not so much to work out the will of God but to come to "see" God in small things. This may eventually lead to seeing God in all things.

This direct reference to seeking and finding out God's will as the aim of discernment is explored by Edward Vacek SJ in his *Discernment Within a Mutual Love Relationship*. Vacek presents and critically examines different views on how to understand the question of the will of God in discernment. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to present these different views but it is relevant to mention that Vacek endorses the position expressed by John Dunne, a writer on spirituality. Dunne refers to his own experience of prayer: when in prayer he seeks to know God's will (what to do, who to be), he receives no answer but what he does receive from prayer (through being in God's presence) is the courage and freedom to make his own agonising decision. So, to the question "Is God only a support, not a guide or is the kind of support we receive from God itself a guide?" Vacek responds that it is the second²³. He suggests that in order to receive this "gift" of support and guidance we have to discern how to discern. Unlike Spohn who focuses on what good discernment must include, Vacek notes that there are several models of good discernment (none is perfect as perhaps discernment and perfection are not an obvious pair, one rarely comes across the notion of perfection in the writings on discernment). Vacek's own model is based on love²⁴ which is similar to the view Pope Francis expresses in *Amoris laetitia* to which we will now turn.

In *Amoris laetitia* we are told what discernment is not: a) it is not applying "rigid classifications"²⁵ and putting people into categories ("divorced" or "remarried" or

²² *Ibid*, p. 104.

²³ See: E.C. VACEK, *Discernment Within a Mutual Love Relationship with God: A New Theological Foundation*, "Theological Studies" 74 (2013), p. 683.

²⁴ He speaks of love as "an emotional, affirmative participation in the goodness of the beloved". *Ibid*, p. 692. He sees emotions as cognitions of value.

²⁵ AL 298.

“living in sin”; b) it is not a straight forward application of general norms (personal contexts and experiences matter); c) it is not a crystal clear way of knowing or understanding which “leaves no room for confusion”²⁶ or thinking that “everything is black and white”²⁷.

In his approach to discernment Pope Francis follows Thomas Aquinas:

Although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects (...) in matters of action, truth or practical rectitude is not the same for all, as to matters of detail, but only as to the general principles; and where there is the same rectitude in matters of detail, it is not equally known to all (...) The principle will be found to fail, according as we descend further into detail²⁸.

Discernment is comfortable with uncertainty, greyness, complexity, and tentativeness. Pope Francis does not dismiss the importance of rules and guidance but he states in – more than in one place in the exhortation – that following the rule or applying law is “not enough” for discernment. This is in line with what we have seen in scholarly views on discernment which suggest that codes and laws are important as they set boundaries but are simply not enough. In discernment, one is attending to other concrete matters such as the will of God in a personal context.

In *Amoris laetitia* Pope Francis connects discernment with conscience. He emphasizes not only the supremacy of individual conscience but also insists that the lay faithful are capable of their own discernment in their consciences. He reinstates the known imperative: “We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them”²⁹. Conscience is not something that is reserved for Catholics or people of faith. As per Roman Catholic teaching, all human beings have a capacity for conscience, the same applies to discernment. Pope Francis talks about discernment of the presence of “seeds of the Word” (God’s Word) in all human beings and cultures³⁰:

In addition to true natural marriage, positive elements exist in the forms of marriage found in other religious traditions. (...) anyone who wants to bring into this world

²⁶ AL 308.

²⁷ AL 308. See: N. AUSTIN, “*Discernment charged with merciful love*”.

²⁸ *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 94, art 4; AL 304.

²⁹ AL 37.

³⁰ See *Ad Gentes* 11.

a family is (...) a gesture aimed at overcoming evil (...) whatever the people, religion or region to which they belong³¹.

So far we have considered the meaning and practice of individual discernment. What does Pope Francis tell us about “pastoral discernment”? To answer this question we have to consider the principle of gradualness (the principle familiar to us from the teaching of St. John Paul II in *Familiaris consortio* and Pope Benedict XVI on HIV/AIDs prevention)³². “Graduality” implies that our moral and spiritual growth takes place in stages and is dynamic; it evolves and changes – we come to recognise the truth gradually, not in one go. Growing into maturity (spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, social, etc.) takes time and continuous effort. This applies to everyone – individuals, couples, pastors, teachers, and parents.

Pope Francis talks about “patient realism” (AL 271–273) in pastoral practice. This does not mean watering down ideals. It means that a special type of attention needs to be given to personal (couple and family) circumstances. And, as it was already stressed, for pastoral discernment rules (although useful) are not enough; the rigorist treatment of individuals goes against the heart of discernment. According to Pope Francis, a

true pastoral care is a process of accompaniment and discernment which guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God (...) it seeks to help a person to judge what hinders fuller participation in the life of the Church and what steps can be taken³³.

So, accompaniment rather than judgment and encouragement rather than condemnation are required for the practice of pastoral discernment³⁴. The role of the pastor is not to disempower but empower and foster individual discernment so that the discernor can see what “for now” God is asking (AL 303)³⁵. Pope Francis recognises that life is messy and human relationships are complex. For him, pastoral discernment is not hostile to this recognition:

³¹ AL 77.

³² JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic exhortation “Familiaris consortio”*, Vatican 1981; BENEDICT XVI, *Light of the World. The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Time. A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, San Francisco 2010.

³³ AL 300.

³⁴ See: AL, Chapter 8.

³⁵ AL 303.

I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a Church attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness³⁶.

Pastoral discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of various limits. Pope Francis is realistic and encouraging when he wants us to rejoice in small steps:

Let us remember that a small step, in the midst of great human limitation, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties³⁷.

Pastoral discernment is not easy. It requires trust that pastors and educators are practicing genuine discernment in their own lives and are able to foster the same in the lives of others. Pastoral discernment is risky. As suggested earlier, discernment recognises greyness and ambiguity. It requires a proper openness to the sources of wisdom (Scripture, other people's wisdom, prayer, Church's teaching) and constant willingness to transform one's thinking and acting. Sensitivity and mercy (a "big heart open to God and the other") are required for dealing well with particular situations. It is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the role of mercy in pastoral discernment. What is important to stress, however, is that for Pope Francis, pastoral discernment is built on mercy ("open heart"; hostility to judgmentalism and superiority; inclusion of the other; willingness to be with the other when they are troubled and weak). Pope Francis is keen to promote "a pastoral discernment filled with merciful love"³⁸. Ideals are still there but there is also a sensitive recognition of the human reality which does not always match the ideal but at the centre of which there is a human being, often judged (even by the Church) and broken:

[u]nderstanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being³⁹.

Finally, it seems that Pope Francis challenges us to see the Church as a discerning church and he does so by drawing our attention to images which promote this

³⁶ AL 308.

³⁷ AL 305.

³⁸ AL 312.

³⁹ AL 307.

particular model of the Church. The next section will “look” into these and other images evoked in the exhortation.

2. *Ekphrases*⁴⁰ and the role of imagination in pastoral discernment

The exhortation is filled with images, symbols, and vivid interpretations of them. We come across key objects such as tables at which families gather and to the Eucharistic Table to which the worshiping community comes. The human couple is described as “a living and effective image”, a “visible sign of his [God’s] creative act”⁴¹; a “living icon”, “not an idol like those of stone or gold”⁴². Pope Francis speaks of a “physical and interior” closeness in “being one flesh”⁴³.

While reflecting on the metaphor “your children are as the shoots of an olive tree” (Ps 128,3) Pope Francis paints a detailed picture of family life in which children are also considered “the living stones” (foundation) of the family; he refers to imagery drawn from architecture and the social life of cities⁴⁴ and suggests that a “family’s living space could turn into a domestic church, a setting for the Eucharist, the presence of Christ seated at its table”⁴⁵. Such a living space can create the right spirit and mood for family discernment. It is here where the concrete (particular family and its life) meet with the wider notion of community (Church and human community).

There is a rich use of analogies apart from the ones mentioned above. For example, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock” from the Book of Revelation is a direct allusion to what a discerning family should do (open the door of its heart to God). There are images of joy and lightness in the family life. However, Pope Francis also draws our attention to the images of suffering and bloodshed (Cain),

⁴⁰ By *ekphrasis* (*ekphrases* in plural in Greek) I mean “verbal images”. A useful basic definition of *ekphrasis* can be found here: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/notes-ekphrasis>. It explains that *ekphrasis* is a “direct transcription from the Greek *ek* – «out of» and *phrasis* – «speech» or «expression». It is often translated simply as «description» and seems originally to have been used as a rhetorical term designating a passage in prose or poetry that describes something. More narrowly, it could designate a passage providing a short speech attributed to a mute work of visual art. In recent decades, the use of the term has been limited, first, to visual description and then even more specifically to the description of a real or imagined work of visual art”.

⁴¹ AL 10.

⁴² AL 11.

⁴³ See for example: AL 13.

⁴⁴ AL 14.

⁴⁵ AL 15.

tragedies of violence (sons and wives of Abraham), family problems (Tobias and Job), struggling (in Jesus' own family and in the lives of his friends, such as Peter's mother-in-law). We come across *ekphrases* related to different realities of married life: when love begins to wear out: "Still water becomes stagnant and good for nothing" ("young love needs to keep dancing"); "Hope is the leaven"⁴⁶; when love breaks, we get images of wounds, separation, pain⁴⁷ and the "sting of death"⁴⁸ (death of a partner and references to grieving families). Chapter Six ends with the image of the heavenly banquet but the banquet is not explored in detail; it is left for our imagination to do the work. The final section of the meditation on Psalm 128 is entitled *The Tenderness of an Embrace*. Pope Francis calls "tenderness" a virtue and defines it as "closeness that is conscious and not simply biological"⁴⁹. He draws our attention to another *ekphrasis*, the Holy Family of Nazareth, which can serve as an icon for contemplation. He focuses not on a cozy picture of the family but "its daily life" which, as he puts it, "had its share of burdens and even nightmares, as when they met with Herod's implacable violence"⁵⁰. He connects this *ekphrasis* with the suffering of many families today: this "experience (...) continues to afflict the many refuge families who in our day feel rejected and helpless"⁵¹. This reality of suffering and pain is further explored in Pope Francis' reflection on the role and mission of the Church. He says that "the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone"⁵². He substantiates this point by saying:

Although she constantly holds up the call to perfection and asks for a fuller response to God, the Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence, like the beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among the people to enlighten those who have lost their way or who are in the midst of a storm. Let us not forget that the Church's task is often like that of a field hospital⁵³.

⁴⁶ AL 219.

⁴⁷ AL 242–246.

⁴⁸ AL 253.

⁴⁹ AL 28.

⁵⁰ AL 30.

⁵¹ AL 30.

⁵² AL 310.

⁵³ AL 291.

It is not for the first time that Pope Francis uses this particular *ekphrasis* of field hospital in relation to the Church. In the earlier mentioned interview with Antonio Spadaro Pope Francis explains:

I see clearly that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. 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 (...). And you have to start from the ground up. (...) How are we treating the people of God? I dream of a church that is a mother and shepherdess. The church's ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the good Samaritan, who washes, cleans and raises up his neighbour. This is pure Gospel⁵⁴.

Healing, helping to recover, providing warmth and presence constitute the mission of the Church. Let us note that the Pope has not got in mind any hospital. He refers to a "field" hospital. The more we look at this image, the more we see in it. This *ekphrasis* tells us something about the urgency of help that is needed and about relying on the skills and resources available here and now. What does pastoral care mean in the Church-as-field-hospital? Pope Francis does not provide a detailed answer but his general approach seems to suggest that any answer must start with compassion towards others, their wounds, mistakes and with the consciousness of our own wounds. We are not always doctors and nurses providing care, we too are patients.

Pope Francis uses another *ekphrasis* in talking about the Church: a shelter. "Shelter" can mean more than one thing, even if its purpose is to protect and provide a kind of comfort zone. Pope Francis reminds us that some comfort zones are problematic and prevent us from seeing the full picture; some comfort zones make us uncomfortable in the face of suffering. As Christians, we must be prepared to move beyond our comfort zones: Jesus "expects us to stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune, and instead to enter into the reality of other people's lives and to know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated"⁵⁵. This second type of shelter is more open and a bit shaky but is filled with tenderness. Entering it is ultimately more rewarding than remaining

⁵⁴ A. SPADARO, *A Big Heart Open to God*.

⁵⁵ AL 308.

in the shelter which protects one from seeing the reality as it is. The Church as field hospital or open shelter is more chaotic and imperfect but at the same time it is more tender.

In another apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* Pope Francis speaks directly of what kind of church he prefers.

I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact 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, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37)⁵⁶.

In our pastoral work Pope Francis wants us to be more self-critical: “[w]e need a healthy dose of self-criticism”⁵⁷. He calls us to shift from the tollhouse-image i.e. a rule-centered view of the Church to a more virtue-centered Church. He is critical of the images of marriage we use. Here he proposes a shift from the image of marriage seen through a duty of procreation to marriage seen as the “call to grow in love and its ideal of mutual assistance”⁵⁸. He wants us to be more realistic about the whole idea of marriage:

At times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families. This excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God’s grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite⁵⁹.

⁵⁶ EG 49.

⁵⁷ AL 36.

⁵⁸ AL 36.

⁵⁹ AL 36.

To respond well to Pope Francis' invitation to move from duty and abstracts to virtue and practice requires a shift in the imagination. He acknowledges that such shift is not easy: we "find difficult to present marriage more as dynamic path to personal development and fulfillment"⁶⁰. He is critical of self-centered images outside and within the Church which put pressure especially on young people and which ultimately don't help anyone in forming good relationships. He reminds us that "[n]arcissism makes people incapable of looking beyond themselves"⁶¹; and warns that "sooner or later, those who use others end up being used themselves, manipulated and discarded by that same mind-set"⁶².

Pope Francis is constantly looking for new language and images which will appeal to young people. He does not give a detailed route on how to achieve this new vocabulary and vision. He just says, generally, that

[w]e need to find the right language, arguments and forms of witness that can help us reach the hearts of young people, appealing to their capacity for generosity, commitment, love and even heroism, and in this way inviting them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage⁶³.

He also tells us which images are destructive (pornography, commercialization, over-sexualisation including in the media, retail, etc.⁶⁴) and which situations create problems (lifestyle, social problems like housing, workloads, migration and violence⁶⁵).

The title of Chapter Three makes a direct reference to perception: *Looking to Jesus*. Looking to Jesus is not the same as listening to Jesus or following Jesus. It requires something like a loving gaze. Loving gaze is a form of vision that is informed by the transcendent value of goodness which can help us to move beyond ourselves and recognize values that we have not created but are there for us to discover. This kind of looking is a form of "unselfing" (a concept used by the British philosopher Iris Murdoch⁶⁶).

⁶⁰ AL 37.

⁶¹ AL 39.

⁶² AL 39.

⁶³ AL 40.

⁶⁴ AL 41.

⁶⁵ AL 49.

⁶⁶ See: I. MURDOCH, *Sovereignty of Good*, Oxon 2001.

Pope Francis seems to talk about something like “unselfing” when he says: “I now wish to turn my gaze to the living Christ, who is at the heart of so many love stories, and to invoke the fire of the Spirit upon all the world’s families”⁶⁷. Here “gazing” is the tool; a delicate, curious attending to what is in front of us. The key image that Pope Francis is using here is fire (as power of the Holy Spirit). He goes on to say more about gazing:

[T]he aesthetic experience of love is expressed in that «gaze» which contemplates other persons as ends in themselves, even if they are infirm, elderly or physically unattractive. A look of appreciation has enormous importance, and to begrudge it is usually hurtful⁶⁸.

Here we see how important looking is, not just the act of looking but the “manner of looking”; looking that results in seeing deeper realities; the external look is secondary to the inner seeing in which the state of personhood of the one who is being looked at is revealed. What exactly is the “look of appreciation”? It is an embracing look; it is a loving “gaze”; unselfing; gratitude and joy.

Pope Francis connects the human experience of looking with God when he says:

It is a profound spiritual experience to contemplate our loved ones with the eyes of God and to see Christ in them. This demands a freedom and openness which enable us to appreciate their dignity. We can be fully present to others only by giving fully of ourselves and forgetting all else. Our loved ones merit our complete attention. Jesus is our model in this, for whenever people approached to speak with him, he would meet their gaze, directly and lovingly (cf. Mk 10:21). No one felt overlooked in his presence⁶⁹.

The exhortation offers us something like a training in looking and seeing. Pope Francis gives us hints what gazing and noticing involves. He talks about “contemplative love” which seems to be the result of this skillful way of looking. He asks us to cultivate “contemplative love” and make every effort to see that we are made for love⁷⁰. The greatest joy in life is when we elicit joy in others (Pope Francis refers to the film *Babette’s Feast* which speaks of this kind of joy, the fruit of generosity).

⁶⁷ AL 59.

⁶⁸ AL 128.

⁶⁹ AL 323.

⁷⁰ AL 129.

Out of the different pictures and stories that Pope Francis explores in the exhortation we get a pretty good list of virtues which can serve as boundaries or criteria for pastoral discernment. The list includes: mercy, joy, tenderness (which is “expressed in a particular way by exercising loving care in treating the limitations of the other, especially when they are evident”⁷¹), empathy, forgiveness, patience, attention, certain type of looking, bringing joy and delight to others, and “shepherding in mercy”⁷². And, there are vices which are considered as obstacles to freedom and good discernment: narcissism, rigorism, abstract attachments to ideas, different addictions, wrong ways of looking and failures to notice. The key attitude that Pope Francis wants us to develop is openness: “Keep an open mind. Do not get bogged down in your own limited ideas and opinions, but be prepared to change or expand them”⁷³. Expanding and changing starts in the imagination.

The different *ekphrasis* and qualities we have considered here are expressions of how Pope Francis sees the Church and human relationships in it. We have a glimpse of his discernment-centered mindset. And, even if we are not completely satisfied with some of his statements in *Amoris laetitia* because he does not speak about the rules and acts in the way other popes did or because he does not go as far as to legitimise certain approaches and practices within sexual morality, nevertheless he empowers us to discern. Pope Francis relies on the imagination in presenting his message. And, he wants us to do the same: to be more imaginative in our own lives and in the practices of the Church. Admittedly, this is not easy for anyone but especially Catholics. Often confused with fantasy, imagination had little place in moral reflection. From the sixth century to the Second Vatican Council, moral theologians were preoccupied with helping priests judge appropriate penances. This sin-based ethic, reflected in the development of penitential books which warned Catholics about wrongdoing, offered little by way of imaginative engagement or positive counsel for the pursuit of a good life. Theology (especially, moral theology) was not meant to foster pastoral discernment. Instead it was reduced to the function of a confessional or moral manual, focused more on moral pathologies than moral creativity and growth.

⁷¹ AL 323.

⁷² AL 312.

⁷³ AL 139.

3. Conclusions

Pope Francis reclaims the imagination as a legitimate disposition to be used in our own lives and in pastoral contexts. He inspires us by the way he handles the stories, images and symbols. He instructs us to be more self-critical and open. He wants us to revisit the key images and symbols with which we operate. The exhortation can be seen as an ecclesial exercise of discernment.

The investigation of *Amoris laetitia* that we have conducted here leads us to conclude that the preoccupation with moral order and plainly defined principles does not fit in easily with a moral wondering which Pope Francis seems to foster in this exhortation. Of course, there is always a risk in moral wondering as it is in discernment. We might be blind to certain important features of the situation, we might not arrive at a decision that is truly best and in accordance with God's will but the alternative (a non-discernment) is even more risky. It can make us cold, disengaged and unfulfilled, and ultimately, refusing to follow the will of God. Engagement in the practice of discernment and facilitation of such a practice for others is the best we can do for ourselves and others. This seems to be the only path to true moral maturity. Even if risky, it can result in courage and freedom which (as pointed out by Vacek and Dunne) are channelled through prayer and being in the presence of God. In order to discern well (individually and pastorally) we must train our imagination. We must learn to disengage from certain preoccupations and learn to empathize, look for blind spots in ourselves and in others. This requires discipline and practice as in the Greek notion of *askesis* – practice with real purpose. The more we practice the more goodness and values we discover. We are drawn to goodness through successive picturing in ourselves what is good. The images to which Pope Francis draws our attention in the exhortation can draw us closer to goodness.

Finally, what is the model of pastoral discernment that Pope Francis wants us to develop? We need to note that Pope Francis is not giving up on the teaching mission of the Church but this is what he says that the teaching Church must do: “the teaching Church, like all good teachers, is asked to step back a little to create a breathing space for an individual to do his or her own discernment”⁷⁴. The *Amoris laetitia* model includes space for the practice of discernment and the empowerment of individuals so that they can genuinely engage in it. The model does not include new rules; a new set of canonical or other rules cannot substitute for “responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases”⁷⁵; it does not

⁷⁴ AL 300.

⁷⁵ AL 300.

need to rely on interventions of magisterium. Pope Francis states at the beginning of the exhortation: “I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium”⁷⁶. So, the model of pastoral discernment has to be open-ended with the view that growth is always gradual, that small steps matter, that weakness and imperfection are part and parcel of our human condition. The model must be realistic; based on mercy and fuelled by joy; hostile to unhealthy parochialism, divisiveness and judgementalism.

For Pope Francis the Church must be a discerning Church. When he refers to the idea of “discerning the body”⁷⁷, he has in mind overcoming scandalous distinctions and divisions within the Church and becoming a true fellowship with everyone. The discerning Church starts with the image of natural family but expands it to the image of a wider family, the universal Church and the world. Pope Francis constantly negotiates between the part and the whole (the concrete situation and the bigger picture – “failings are a part of a bigger picture”⁷⁸). Starting with the human situation, accepting guidance of the Holy Spirit and opening to others are all part of the framework of pastoral discernment. Pope Francis himself endorses this framework: “This offers us a framework and a setting which help us avoid a cold bureaucratic morality in dealing with more sensitive issues”⁷⁹. It is this framework that the Church is called to adopt here and now.

*

Literature

AUSTIN N., “*Discernment charged with merciful love*”: *Pope Francis’ Amoris laetitia, on Love in the Family*, “Thinking Faith”, 8 April 2016; <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/discernment-charged-merciful-love-pope-francis%E2%80%99-amoris-laetitia-love-family-0> (24.10.2016).

BENEDICT XVI, *Light of the World. The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Time. A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, San Francisco 2010.

FRANCIS, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “Amoris laetitia”*, Vatican 2016.

GUSTAFSON J.M., *Can Ethics Be Christian?* Chicago 1975.

⁷⁶ AL 3.

⁷⁷ AL 185–186.

⁷⁸ AL 113.

⁷⁹ AL 312.

- GUSTAFSON J.M., *Theology and Christian Ethics*, Philadelphia 1974.
- JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic exhortation "Familiaris consortio"*, Vatican 1981.
- MURDOCH I., *Sovereignty of Good*, Oxon 2001.
- NIEBUHR H.R., *Responsible Self. An Essay on Christian Moral Philosophy*, Westminster 1999.
- NIEBUHR H.R., *War as Crucifixion*, „The Christian Century” 60 (1943), p. 513–515.
- SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Decree on the mission activity of the Church "Ad gentes"*, Vatican 1965.
- SPADARO A., *A Big Heart Open to God*, „Thinking Faith” (19 September 2013), https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20130919_1.htm.
- SPOHN W.C., *The Reasoning Heart: An American Approach to Christian Discernment*, „Theological Studies” 44 (1983), p. 30.
- ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II.
- VACEK E.C., *Discernment Within a Mutual Love Relationship with God: A New Theological Foundation*, „Theological Studies” 74 (2013), p. 683–710.

*

Streszczenie: Rozeznanie duszpasterskie, ekfrazy i wyobrażenia w adhortacji apostołskiej *Amoris laetitia*. Artykuł podejmuje próbę określenia pojęcia „rozeznania duszpasterskiego” w oparciu o ekfrazy (obrazy słowne, które mają na celu mobilizację wyobraźni i unaocznianie tego, co ważne) w adhortacji apostołskiej *Amoris laetitia*. Zawiera ogólną refleksję na temat języka adhortacji i kluczowych sformułowań na temat rozeznania jako praktyki osobistej i eklezjalnej. Praktyka ta w kontekście modlitwy ma na celu przybliżyć znaki, symbole, pomóc zrozumieć uczucia, myśli i spełnić rolę „wglądu” w poszczególne sytuacje osoby podejmującej decyzje. W zgłębieniu pojęcia „rozeznania” służą pomocą myśli trzech teologów moralistów: Williama Spohna, Jamesa Gustafsona i Edwarda Vacka. Główna dyskusja toczy się wokół relacji pomiędzy prawem i przepisami a rzeczywistością, której nie da się opisać w kolorach czarno-białych, a która jest często wieloznaczna. Przytoczone zostały podejścia papieża Franciszka, który w oparciu o zasadę „stopniowości” oraz cnoty miłości miłosiernej, przypatrywania i przywiązywania uwagi, nawołuje do „cierpliwego realizmu”, postrzegania rozeznającego Kościoła jako „szpitala polowego”, „schroniska” i rodziny, która nie waha się wyjść poza literę prawa.

Słowa kluczowe: *Amoris laetitia*, rozeznanie, wyobrażenia, obrazy słowne, model Kościoła.

Abstract: This paper examines the notion of “pastoral discernment” in the post-synodal exhortation *Amoris laetitia*. It attempts to find out what Pope Francis means by his frequently used term “discernment” and how he sees the role of discernment in the lives of

individuals as well as an ecclesial practice. This practice, which takes place in prayer, aims at reading signs, symbols, emotions, thoughts; it seeks to acquire an insight or a set of insights into the specific situation of the discerning person. To illuminate further the practice of discernment, three moral theological works, by William Spohn, James Gustafson and Edward Vacek, will be briefly explored. The article examines the language and *ekphrases* (verbal images) and argues that Pope Francis in this document reclaims imagination as an important tool for pastoral discernment. The main discussion touches upon the relationship between moral norms and regulations on the one hand and the human reality that is seldom black and white and cannot be adequately captured by legalistic approaches. Attention will be drawn to Pope Francis' endorsement of the principle of graduality and qualities of mercy, gazing, attentiveness and "patient realism" as well as to the possibility of the discerning Church model, which is best captured in such images as "field hospital", "shelter", and "family".

Keywords: *Amoris laetitia*, discernment, imagination, verbal images, model of Church.