

Equivocation vs Compassion

I have heard stories from the “old days” wherein a married woman went to a priest for counsel about her marriage: She was being beaten and abused and she was finding no help from therapists, counselors or law enforcement. It had come to the point where she was contemplating a separation and, for financial reasons, possibly a civil divorce. The priest’s response to the woman was a clear explanation of Church teaching: *Marriage is indissoluble! Let no one separate what God has joined!* And his advice was, **“Go back to your husband!”**

Now, clearly, this is a story from days-gone-by and an extreme example. But the woman who had sought counsel was not presenting as one who opposed Church Teaching or as one who wanted to water it down. She was being abused by her husband and it might be that her life was in danger. The priest has clearly enunciated the doctrine of the Church about the Sacrament of Marriage to her as if that was the answer to her problem. It was as if he didn’t comprehend the cry for help in the face of danger or the civil and financial complications of separation and divorce.

Early in my priesthood an old man opined to me that he missed the old days when priest’s told it like it was: **“It wasn’t all of this ‘love’ talk! They told people what would send them to Hell!”**

Implicitly, I was one of those guys preaching about ‘love’ too much, as if love were some meaningless or minor theme of Faith.

Perhaps a distinction should be made between equivocation and telling the truth in a pastorally nuanced way. Equivocation means using ambiguous language to conceal the truth or to avoid committing oneself. There’s a lot of concern about the ministry of the popular Jesuit author, James Martin, who seeks to reconcile self-identified “LGBTQ” people with the Church: In so many words, he is accused of equivocating with respect to the firm teaching of the Church on human sexual ethics. I would leave the actual judgment about him to those who have closely scrutinized his writings. But, if it is true, it is a disservice to the Church and the community he is attempting to shepherd into the Church.

On the other hand, pastoral sensitivity to the real plight of a person is very important. It is as Jesus

says concerning the Sabbath: **“The Sabbath is for man, not man for the Sabbath.”** The Gospel of the day that I am composing this reflection depicted Jesus healing an old woman in the Temple on the Sabbath. And, seeing the event, the priest protested, that people should come on the other days for healing, not on the Sabbath. **[I imagine someone would have proclaimed him a “courageous priest,” unlike his wishy washy confreres.]** Jesus, in turn, retorts *“You hypocrites! Do you not untie your ox or your ass on the Sabbath and lead it out for watering? . . . Ought [this woman] not to have been set free on the sabbath from this bondage?”* The priest was upholding the law of the Sabbath according to a strict interpretation and clear pronouncement but, somehow, completely missing the plight of the woman in his midst, and the wonderful healing which had been given her.

One never knows who is sitting in the congregation on Sunday or the circumstances which may have led them to commit grave evil. The good news is they are in church which, hopefully, signifies repentance. What some people consider “clear teaching” or “courageous” statements from the pulpit can be received as condemnations or denunciations. To express compassion for people who have divorced, procured abortion, committed adultery or gotten involved in the culture of LBGTQ is not to equivocate on the teaching of the Church. We must tell them the truth about such grave matters, but also recognize the context of personal struggles, dysfunctions in the family, deformative experiences, and so forth.

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.

- POPE FRANCIS -

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If compassion is confused with equivocation around Church teaching, whose fault is that? As a teacher, I need to consider this and always seek greater clarity. We can wield true doctrine like the priest in the opening example; like a blunt instrument with no consideration of the person. But, dealing with flesh and blood requires sensitivity and compassion. If I am going to err, it will be as to the latter and not the former way.