

6. Unheard, Untold, and Lived: Carving a Path Together to Reclaim the Good

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A Story Untold

This chapter unveils the lived experience of a woman, Naomi, who struggled in a marriage that almost negated her personhood.¹ When she finally found the courage to break free, she filed for a civil annulment and was granted it. However, she felt negated yet again upon reading the court decision that ruled her marriage “Void *ab initio*.” She grappled with the abuses of her husband in this marriage that had just been declared null by the court. She felt voided herself in a marriage that almost destroyed her, yet that union she had endured did not really exist in the judgment of the family court. In her struggle to reclaim her worth and rebuild her life, she found love with another woman, and this time, she wants this to matter. Her voice is one that might challenge a synodal church to listen to the real experience of one person who finds herself on the margins. Although she walked away from her marriage, she never left the church nor abandoned her faith. In her persistent and humble prayer, she experienced God’s mercy that gave her the strength to live again. It made her appreciate her value despite what had happened to her and the current relationship she finds herself in. The physical touch that restored Naomi’s trust in her own body also seems to have fueled her desire to receive the body of Christ. It is a touch that purges the repulsion she felt toward her own body. Coming

¹ This is a fictional name given to the participant of this study in order to protect her identity and preserve the confidentiality required in this phenomenological investigation, using the IPA. This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Review Committee (ERC) process of the University of San Agustin, Iloilo City, Philippines. An informed consent form was signed by the participant on April 13, 2023.

out of an abusive relationship, this appears to be the beginning of Naomi's healing. Could the church provide a space for Naomi to explore deeply her faith with her same-sex partner?

In calling the community to become a synodal church, Pope Francis has opened the door to listen to people at the margins. This woman is definitely marginal and feels it deeply. In this forum of EWA, I want to bring her story to start a conversation that asks if we as women in the church can hear her story with open ears. I am trusting that this is a "third space" where women can speak openly from the heart.

In this chapter, I present her experience as one who seeks recognition in a church that considers her relationship illicit, or as one that is viewed as *intrinsece malum*. In the language of the moral tradition of the church, especially contained in Pope Saint John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, an intrinsic evil is seen as an act that is "incapable of being ordered" to God because it "radically contradicts the good of the person made in [God's] image" (no. 80).

Certainly, the existence of evil cannot be denied. Acts against humanity that are deliberately intentioned and systematically carried out to harm others should not be permitted because they destroy the good and the dignity of the human person, whether they are the victim or perpetrator of the evil act. Pope Francis acknowledges the existence of evil, although he uses the term mortal sins to point to these destructive acts rather than intrinsic evil (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 301). This phrase is not even mentioned in his exhortation that touches upon divorce, remarriage, civil unions, and to certain extent homosexual unions (*Amoris Laetitia*, nos. 250–251). He rather calls for a pastoral accompaniment to those mired in these situations so they can be fully integrated into the sacramental life of the church. This pastoral approach recognizes that it could be possible that even "in an objective situation of sin," a person could be "living in God's grace, can love, and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church's help to this end" (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 305). Naomi's story seems to echo this point, as while she lives with her partner, she is still able to

recognize God's mercy and grace that opened her eyes to her own dignity and worth as a person. Grace is not lost in a heart that seeks God's mercy.

Pope Francis exhorts the faithful to offer mercy and guidance to those who find themselves in situations that seem to limit their ability or stifle their capacity to meet the moral standards of the church. I situate her lived experience in this call in *Amoris Laetitia*. I contend, however, that before any form of pastoral accompaniment can be proposed, a space is needed to allow for the sharing of experiences to happen. It is here, thus, that the lived experience of Naomi is unpacked and discussed.

This chapter seeks to find a common ground where both moral theology—as brought out in *Veritatis Splendor*—and the lived experience of the baptized living in same-sex unions can meet. How does one inform the other? How can this be brought into conversation with the church's moral tradition? These questions guide the flow of this chapter, which examines the understanding of the church on issues relating to love, intimacy, marriage, and family life. The major document used here is *Amoris Laetitia*, especially concerning those in cohabiting relationships, similar to the lived experience of Naomi.

The methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is used in this chapter to help surface how Naomi makes sense of her experience from her previous to current relationship status. The qualitative research framework of IPA examines “how people make sense of their major life experiences.”² This qualitative method draws its theoretical framework from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and an idiographic approach, as it focuses on a phenomenon uniquely experienced by the individual.³

Using IPA as a methodology affords Naomi a space to retell her story, and in the process, reflect on what transpired in her life. Here, she is able to unveil God's presence in the midst of her troubled past, broken marriage, and current relationship status. Through IPA, Naomi is able to

² Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, and Research* (Sage, 2009), 1–3.

³ Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, 3.

recover her voice to share how her relationship with a woman restores her trust in her own body and self. This is the space where she desires to be recognized and accompanied by the church in her journey to reclaim her worth, in a relationship where she experienced God's mercy and grace, in her past and present state.

A Story Retold: A Space of Recollection and Recognition

Naomi shared her lived experience as a person who finds herself in a same-sex union after breaking off from an abusive husband. Her experience, however, cannot speak for all or make a broader claim about the findings of this chapter. It may contribute though, to carving a pathway where a person who is willing to stake their claim in the church, could share their experience, however harrowing.

I initially approached Naomi for referrals for my dissertation project on cohabiting unions. This piqued her curiosity. Thus, I arranged various meetings with her to discuss the criteria of selection of participants. She expressed her interest in sharing her own experience with the project.

She started as my conversation partner, and I conveyed to her what I wished to uncover: the grace and mercy of God as they are recognized by those in cohabiting relationships. The purpose, however, is not simply to see how these phenomena appear but also to examine how they are recognized by those in complex relationships. The larger concern is how to host mercy and grace and to provide a space for deeper exploration of these lived experiences.

Having laid out this framework, Naomi asked me to practice the interview questions with her. This is the genesis of this IPA exploration. The conversation partner becomes herself the host in this theological exploration of a lived experience in a same-sex union, categorized by the church as intrinsically disordered.

She brought her experience as a person who in her adult life, sought baptism in the Catholic Church in order to marry one who was baptized in the faith. Thirteen years later, her marriage fell apart despite efforts to join church-sponsored faith organizations like Marriage Encounter,

Gugma sang Diyos (Love of God), and spiritual direction from their parish priest. The married couple also joined other groups from the Jehovah Witnesses in the hope of saving their marriage.

What she shared comes from her personal perspective as she broke all her connections with her ex-husband when the marriage was civilly annulled. This chapter, then, can only present her lived experience without the view of the other half.

In this particular engagement, I deploy the concept of just hospitality which is taken from the original work of feminist theologian Letty M. Russell. In one of her papers, Russell defines hospitality as, “the practice of God’s welcome by reaching out across [differences] to participate in God’s actions bringing justice and healing in our world of crisis and the fear of the ones we call ‘other.’ As strangers to ourselves and to so many people, we have this possibility of learning to trust ourselves and others as a sign of God’s concern for us all, and for all creation.”⁴

This definition anchors Russell’s feminist, postcolonial hermeneutic of hospitality where she exposes the power imbalance where the stranger is considered an ontological “other” that needs to be changed into the likeness of the dominant group.⁵ She describes the “other” as those with different “nationality, skin color, gender, sexual orientation” from the “dominant political, economic, and social norm.”⁶

Russell’s concept of a “world of riotous difference”⁷ characterizes hospitality not simply to welcome the “other” but also to recognize the differences and offer a space for this “riotous diversity” to emerge and not be silenced by the dominant other.⁸ This hospitality is based on justice, not merely on the capacity of the host to welcome the “other” in their own

⁴ Letty M. Russell, “Encountering the ‘Other’ in a World of Difference and Danger,” *Harvard Theological Review* 99, no. 4 (October 2006): 467.

⁵ See also Sally Stamper, “Just Hospitality: God’s Welcome in a World of Difference,” *Anglican Theological Review* 92, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 243.

⁶ Russell, “Encountering the ‘Other,’” 459.

⁷ Russell, “Encountering the ‘Other,’” 462.

⁸ Russell, “Encountering the ‘Other,’” 467.

space. This finds an echo in the basic premise of synodality, the theme of this conference, which offers a process to encourage people to become open to differing positions and opinions.

Russell applies the concept from the experience of the Presbyterian Church in the US. I use the phrase “riotous diversity” to try to engender a spirit of participation, communion, and mission with the believing community that struggles to be faithful to the teaching of the church in a world that is in a constant state of flux.

Russell posits that hospitality calls for a welcoming of differences that does not resort to easy unity or what she refers to as “cheap unity” where the “other” who is different from the dominant group is asked to submit to the “one interpretation of faith in Christ.”⁹ This seems to echo what Pope Francis exhorts in *Amoris Laetitia*: “Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it” (no. 3).

Phenomenological Interpretative Analysis: Being Attentive to What Appears

As previously stated, Naomi’s lived experience is scrutinized using the IPA. While relatively new in theological exploration, IPA has existed since the mid-1990s. It is used in studies in psychology, health, nursing, and education, and is now being explored in other fields, such as environmental philosophy.¹⁰ The rise of the popularity of qualitative research methodologies, especially in the human, social, and health sciences, may be attributed to the seeming disaffection with the limitations

⁹ Russell, “Encountering the ‘Other,’” 467.

¹⁰ See Susann M. Laverty, “Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (September 2003): 21–35, doi.org/10.1177/160940690300200303. Also see Kalpita Bhar Paul, “Introducing Interpretive Approach of Phenomenological Research Methodology in Environmental Philosophy in the Anthropocene,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (August 2017): 1–10, doi.org/10.1177/1609406917724916.

of quantitative methods to explore deeper questions on “meaning rather than prediction.”¹¹

While IPA draws largely from phenomenology, it does not attempt to operationalize this philosophy but rather draws some significant concepts from it to understand how people make sense of their lived experiences, and the manner they are examined and interpreted.¹² This seeming fluid treatment of phenomenology in IPA, propounded by Jonathan A. Smith, signifies that the methodology is not static but rather dynamic. It continues to evolve; hence it is not constrained by the conceptual limitations of phenomenology as developed by Edmund Husserl.¹³

This is, however, criticized by scholars like Amedeo Giorgi, who views IPA as problematic because it does not meet the scientific general criteria.¹⁴ His critique comes from his observation that Smith hardly mentions science in his articles or in the book he co-wrote on IPA; neither does he identify the necessary steps taken that may possibly replicate IPA.¹⁵

The methodology is concerned with “exploring experience in its own terms.”¹⁶ Lived experiences are not replicable nor are they experienced the same way by other individuals. What IPA does is to probe the significance of an experience and bring out the reflections of the individual experiencing it.¹⁷ This makes the methodology interpretive not only descriptive, and as such, IPA is “informed by hermeneutics.”¹⁸

In this chapter, the methodology is fluidly designed to show how phenomenology could provide a staging area for a theological exploration of a lived experience. It seeks to find an appropriate interpretive key that

¹¹ Lavery, “Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology,” 21.

¹² Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, 6.

¹³ Lavery, “Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology,” 22.

¹⁴ Amedeo Giorgi, “IPA and Science: A Response to Jonathan Smith,” *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 42, no. 2 (2011): 196.

¹⁵ Giorgi, “IPA and Science,” 196.

¹⁶ Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, 1.

¹⁷ Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, 3.

¹⁸ Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*, 3.

recognizes the singularity of each experience as lived by a human person who partakes in the incarnated reality of God's mercy and grace.

The Lived Experience Observed by the Other: Findings and Discussion

The lived experience of Naomi on mercy and grace surfaced when asked the following questions: 1) How did she meet her current partner? and 2) What sustained her (then and now) in this relationship? The questions were posed also in Hiligaynon:¹⁹

1. *Pwede mo bala isaysay sa akon kon paano nagsugod o kon paano ka nagsulod sa sining relasyon?* (Could you share how your relationship started?)
2. *Ano ang nagpabaskug sa imo sa sining relasyon?* (What sustained you in this relationship?)

She was also asked regarding her experience of the church, what she went through from her marriage, to her annulment, and her current relationship status.

The Lived Experience of Mercy Interpreted

Naomi uses the Hiligaynon term "*pangampo*" to entreat and beseech God's help through prayer. She also demonstrated the posture she assumes when she prays, kneeling and bowing close to the ground as if kissing the feet of God. She seems to consider herself not worthy, so she bows her head down almost at the level of God's feet. But it is in this posture of prayer, in a humble position, that she experienced God's mercy, uplifting her from

¹⁹ Hiligaynon is one of the major languages spoken in the Philippines. It is used in Iloilo City and the northern towns of the Province of Iloilo along its coastline. It is also widely spoken in the Province of Negros Occidental, located in the same region as Iloilo, the Western Visayas. Naomi hails from this region, where she was born, raised, and educated. She still lives in one of the major cities in the Western Visayas region.

her misery, almost cleansing her body from the repulsion she felt about it, in Hiligaynon, “*nangil-ad ako*.” In her account, mercy is manifested in her being able to hug her own body, dispelling her feeling of revulsion. It is also when she allowed another to embrace her that she felt mercy. This touch comes from someone the church views as “intrinsically disordered.” She is in a same-sex union yet she does not find this physical touch revolting.

Then she laid out something that seems to challenge conventional belief in relationships.

I know from experience that God listens to my prayers. But now, I am not sure whether being with my partner is an answer to my prayer or not. I could only say this. When I was in a normal relationship, married to a man, I was physically and psychologically abused, bullied, disrespected, violated. Then I met someone who restored my trust in my body and myself.

But it was not considered normal. I am in a same-sex union where I felt overjoyed, loved, provided [for], and respected. So what is normal? What is acceptable?²⁰

From her sharing, mercy is something that is invoked, a movement toward God through humble prayer. This signifies her dependence on God, especially in moments when she feels so helpless, impotent, and about to give up. In her own account,

Nagapangampo ako (I entreated God to help me). God is my only recourse . . . I worked at a government agency that handles violence against women, yet there I was battered and abused. *Amo lang ini ang akon mahimo* (This was all I could do [pray]).

²⁰ This was from the interview conducted on April 15, 2023.

She felt ashamed for not being able to do something about her situation. She felt unworthy and filthy, in her own words “*nangil-ad na gid ako sa akon nga lawas*” (I find my body repulsive). Yet when she prayed, she felt cleansed and experienced God’s mercy. In her humble posture, her body becomes aware of God’s presence. It is in this lowly position that she experienced being uplifted by God. Then she found someone who gave her comfort. But she is also a woman. A lesbian. It is like jumping from an abusive relationship to one that is unacceptable, almost forbidden.

She reflected on this experience: “All I know is that God listened to me, as I finally found the courage to break free from that abusive relationship.” It seems enough that God listens to her cries. The presence of her partner, though, seems to give her the push to walk away from such an abusive relationship. Through prayer, she also finds her voice and a new purpose. Mercy empowers. This led her to share her experience publicly which was printed in a local chapter to raise awareness on violence against women. She finds a renewed strength to continue what she used to do.

Although God responded to her prayer, she also admitted, “There are things that I never understand. But I know that when I pray to God, I feel at peace. I still feel anger well up within me, so I pray because I tend to lash out. I am capable of harming others as well, so I continue to pray for mercy.” She disclosed here that she sometimes feels like smothering her ex-husband to death. Naomi confessed having murderous thoughts against her husband. But in her own reflection, mercy helps her curb her violent thoughts, and her prayer prevents her from actualizing them. The interview about mercy took place on the day before Divine Mercy Sunday which in 2023 fell on April 16. On that Sunday, when I attended mass, I did what she always does, prayed to God for her intentions.

Mercy uplifts and raises her despite some of her misgivings. It gives her the courage to share publicly her experience of abuse in order to help others recognize its patterns. Mercy also enables her to deal with her temper. Despite being abused by her husband, she refrained from retaliating. In this sense, mercy empowers her to respond nonviolently to

her situation. She always seems to describe the presence of mercy “by being at peace.”

But something still bothers her. We forayed then into the realm of grace. In her own lived experience, she feels that God is still present regardless of her relationship status: same-sex union. In her own reflection, God still cares and understands. And she is astonished with this considering what she did: walked away from her marriage and entered into this same-sex union. In her own words, “I feel that God still cares for me even in this relationship.”

She is in a long-distance relationship with her lesbian partner. Also, at her age (early 60’s), she is simply content lying in bed, “just talking about almost anything under the sun.” She laughed nervously when she talked about her physical relationship with her partner. But beyond that she values their friendship, a connection she never felt in her marriage. Naomi wishes to spend the rest of her life with her lesbian partner.

Despite the complex relationship she is in now, she remains in church and continues to go regularly to Sunday mass. She also expressed her wish to receive communion the way she did when she was still married but abused. She recounted that if she came late for mass and missed the part where the assembly recites the prayer, “I confess to almighty God . . .,” she would make an effort to attend another mass. She seems to consider this part important. In fact, when she shared this experience, she struck her breast while reciting the whole penitential prayer in this interview! She explained that she feels connected to God and the community when she goes to mass. She considers the mass as a “complete package,” although she misses the regular interaction she had when she used to attend different organizations in the church when she had marital problems

The Lived Experience of Grace Interpreted

Naomi considers grace as the presence of God not only within her but also in the community and she seems to feel this acutely when she goes to Sunday mass. But she seems to consider that people frown on her relationship, perhaps because of its physical-union aspect. Hence, she

seems to steer the discussion away from it and focuses instead on the value of connection and friendship that develop from this union. She never had this connection in her previous marriage.

She admitted not going to confession ever since she was in this relationship. Naomi shared though that she “feels forgiven,” hence, she strives to go to Sunday mass regularly. Again, she mentioned being particularly attentive to the penitential act because she perceives this as a way where she could publicly acknowledge her sins in the assembly without going into the details. This is the part where she feels that her participation is needed, especially when she admitted that she would go to another mass again if she misses this penitential act where *Kyrie Eleison* or Lord Have Mercy is also recited. This is a prayer she is most familiar with.

She readily mentioned this penitential act when she identified grace in the liturgy. Naomi recognized the presence of God or in her words, “God still remains with me,” regardless of what she has done. Is this what grace is all about? The abiding presence and faithfulness of God despite “what we have done and failed to do.” It seems that with her desire to remain in the church, she exhibits her willingness to reorient herself to what could be “pleasing to God.”

Her responses seem to have been formed by the images she sees and words she hears from the mass, rather than by any explicit moral instruction. In her feeble way, she tries not only to shy away from discussing the physical aspect of her same-sex relationship but also attempts to bring the value of friendship that develops from this union. Naomi expresses her wish to grow old with her partner, in their physical bodies that could appreciate affectionate friendship without engaging in sexual acts. This seems her way of moving toward the good, in her weakened constitution, restored in part by the touch of her lesbian partner. Her humble prayers open up the portal to God’s mercy and grace and lead her to act.

Church Teachings as Dialogue Partners on the Path to Healing and Freedom

Amoris Laetitia may help explore avenues where individuals who are in complex situations (the divorced, remarried, and those in same-sex unions) could be brought into the dialogue with the view that they may be able to teach us about what it means to be a church in this contemporary world. The acts of couples in homosexual unions have been seen as “incapable of being ordered to God” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 82), because they do not fit neatly with the procreative nature of sex ascribed to marital unions.

Published in 2016, *Amoris Laetitia* was issued during the Jubilee of Mercy where the Pope encouraged the people to be “a sign of mercy” for families living in imperfect situations (no. 5). He invites us to offer mercy to those who find themselves in situations that “fall short of what the Lord demands of us” (no. 6).

This apostolic exhortation materialized from the two synods on the family called by Pope Francis: the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in October 2014 and the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, held in October 2015. These synods were preceded by local consultations.²¹

This listening process and the inclusion of other voices in the synod is a marriage itself of the ancient practice of the church in the first millennium and the demands of contemporary culture.²² The process does not only signal a shift in the participation of the laity in the church but likewise on the way doctrines or the official teachings of the church could be rethought and reinterpreted based on the “signs of the times” as proffered by the Council Fathers of Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4).

²¹ For context, especially on how this was done from the US experience, see Cardinal Donald Wuerl, “Pope Francis, Synodality, and *Amoris Laetitia*,” Georgetown Sacred Lecture Series, September 12, 2017, blog.adw.org/2017/09/georgetown-sacred-lecture-series-pope-francis-synodality-amoris-laetitia/.

²² Gerry O’Hanlon, “Ireland and the Quiet Revolution in the Catholic Church,” *The Furrow* 68, no. 5 (2017): 261, jstor.org/stable/44738549.

The recognition of the contribution of the lay baptized in the synods should not be underemphasized. The sharing of Naomi in this chapter, for example, points to the significance of the participation of the lay baptized in the discussion, as they themselves could lay bare their lives for scrutiny. In this way they could share with the believing community how they have navigated the treacherous terrain of marital relationships worn down by abuse, neglect, and betrayal. And through all this this, they have held on to their faith that gave them hope to love and live again.

Arnaud Join-Lambert, in his article “Accompanying, Discerning, and Integrating the Fragility of Couples,” highlights the significance of synodality that needs to be put into practice.²³ He offers his own reflection here: “We shall arrive at the fullness of truth only at the end of time. In the present time, we remain marked by our multiple cultural contexts, which make different interpretations possible. The very reason for the existence of the church is to make it possible for these cultures to be embodied against the horizon of unity, and hence of hope.”²⁴

Although this raises resistance and disagreement from some sectors of the church’s hierarchy, *Amoris Laetitia* reframes the dialogue within the purview of pastoral ministry and theology.²⁵ Synodality is given a new emphasis by Pope Francis, where “journeying together,” involves the “whole Church, pastors and flock, walking and working together to explore the needed pastoral responses to the challenges of today.”²⁶ A synodal church opens a pathway for untold stories to be heard. It gives a space for someone like Naomi to disclose what it is like to recognize God’s magnanimous response to her plea for mercy. This impels her to remain in

²³ Arnaud Join-Lambert, “Accompanying, Discerning, and Integrating the Fragility of Couples: Pastors and Theologians at a Crossroads,” in *A Point of No Return? Amoris Laetitia on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*, ed. Thomas Knieps-Port Le Roi (LIT Verlag, 2017), 141–161.

²⁴ Join-Lambert, “Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating,” 147–148.

²⁵ See James F. Keenan, “Regarding *Amoris Laetitia*: Its Language, Its Reception, Some Challenges, and Agnosticism of Some of the Hierarchy,” *Perspectiva Teológica* 53, no. 1 (2021): 41–60, doi.org/10.20911/21768757v53n1p41/202.

²⁶ Wuerl, “Pope Francis, Synodality, and *Amoris Laetitia*.”

the church. In her own words, “*Ano na lang ang matabo sa akon kon madulaan pa ako sang pagtoo?*” (What would become of me if I lose my faith?). In her fractured and troubled married life, praying to God became her only path toward reclaiming not only her worth, but her very life itself.

This area of ecclesial discourse undergoes a change in *Amoris Laetitia*. The synodal conversation engages the concrete realities of the faithful living in complex situations rather than simply viewing and discussing them in abstract terms.²⁷ Join-Lambert summons those who are in irregular unions and are “willing to take their place in the church” to participate in this synodal initiative.²⁸ They could offer their reflections of their own experiences and claim their space in the church. Their own participation constitutes their baptismal dignity.²⁹

The lived experience of the lay baptized, like that of Naomi, could be examined with the view that while “the bishops are the official teachers and guardians of the faith, the faith is also expressed and voiced among all the faithful.”³⁰ This builds upon the call of Vatican II to listen to the “sense of the faithful,” or be attentive to the “People of God as it is led by the Spirit of the Lord who fills the earth” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1).

This shift of focus potentially provides a space where the in-breaking of the Spirit of God is recognized in the lives of those in complex relationships. Could this open a pathway where something viewed as “incapable of being ordered to God,” like same sex relationships, can be oriented toward the good?

The encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* opens with the question posed by the rich man in the Gospel of Matthew, “Teacher, what good must I do?” (Matthew 19:16). The Gospels of Mark and Luke also carry the story of this encounter. However, in Luke, this rich man is also identified as a ruler (Luke 18:18). In all three accounts, Jesus addresses the question of the rich man by first laying out what is good, “There is only one who is good”

²⁷ Join-Lambert, “Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating,” 157, 160.

²⁸ Join-Lambert, “Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating,” 157.

²⁹ Join-Lambert, “Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating,” 159.

³⁰ Wuerl, “Pope Francis, Synodality, and *Amoris Laetitia*.”

(Matthew 19:17). Mark and Luke present the scene with Jesus explicitly referring to this good as God, “No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18 and Luke 18:19). Pope John Paul II underscores this, “*Only God can answer the question about what is good, because he is the Good itself*” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 9).

We could also glean from this encounter that despite following the commandments handed down to Moses and cited by Jesus, “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,” and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 19:18–19, also in Mark 10:19 and Luke 18:20), the rich man still seeks what is good. It appears that keeping these commandments could still leave a person searching for the good.

This exchange between the rich man and Jesus may help shape the pastoral accompaniment for same sex couples. Perhaps this could also inform the believing community of the conditions that could block the Spirit of God from breaking into the lives of the faithful and inhibit them from flourishing.

This circles back to the significance of a synodal church. The experiences of those in complex situations, like Naomi’s, could invite the church to enter into the disturbing messiness of these experiences that do not seem to adhere to conventional patterns. They too, however, deserve to be recognized because they also have something to offer about the ways the good is experienced in their lives. Pope St. John Paul II himself recognized the person’s capacity to experience the good even if at times the action of the individual seems to contradict the “objective moral order” (*Veritatis Splendor*, no. 62).

Now let us go back to the gospel story cited in *Veritatis Splendor*. It is curious that while Jesus explicitly mentions the commandments that pertain to human interactions, Jesus is quite subtle about the rich man’s relationship with God. After he tells the rich man to sell what he has and give what he owns to the poor, he invites him to “then come follow me” (Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22).

Only God is good. The Word made flesh, the God with us, is the Supreme Pastor of the Church. This underlines Pope Francis's exhortation to move forward as a church and bring mercy to those in most need of it. God is not only Good. God is mercy itself.

How can the church help a human person "be oriented to God?"

Revisiting Mercy and Grace for a Synodal Praxis

The lived experience explored in this chapter, while not representative of a broader population, could present opportunities for the church to open avenues of engagement where experiences of people in same sex unions could be shared. This, however, prompts the question, "Could the church see the person's experience from another light?" Could the church consider it as a manifestation of God's loving kindness? This question shifts the focus to mercy and grace. God responds to those who humbly implore mercy. God stays close to those who cry for mercy and fall short of the church's moral standard. These could provide an entry point where Naomi's pleas may be heard. Naomi's lived experience offers a glimpse of how she deals with a moral dilemma.

The church's moral tradition serves as a reliable guide to a right and just Christian living. This tradition governed by moral norms, however, ultimately serves the value of the good of the human person. In a pastoral accompaniment, these norms could be clarified to help the person achieve the good or abide by the sacramental discipline required of their condition. The basic consideration is how these norms could help those in cohabiting relationships live righteously, or at the most basic, retain their dignity as humans loved into existence by God. A pastoral accompaniment based on mercy emboldens the church to opt for a more loving option. Being loved by another person is an initial step to this consummate Love, profoundly expressed in the Eucharistic liturgy and on the cross.

"How could the church allow for other views to emerge based on experiences that may run counter to the Church's moral tradition?" Russell's concept on the "riotous difference" may be of help as we could see that despite the messiness of one's life, one could still get a glimpse of

God's mercy and grace as shared by Naomi. It seems that when she reflects on her lived experience, she is given a space to be "reoriented to God." She herself identified the ways by which she was able to recognize mercy and grace, through her humble posture, prayer and participation in the liturgy. Naomi pays special attention to the readings and the homilies to help her rebuild her life after being in an abusive relationship and finding herself in a same-sex union. But while she strives toward the good, there are conditions and canonical structures that limit her options toward a full participation in the sacramental life of the church, like receiving communion. But because she still continues to go to Sunday mass, she bears witness to how the common faith in Jesus in the Gospels, in the Eucharist, and in her own personal experience could meet in the liturgy. In this space, the good news is continually proclaimed and celebrated (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 24).³¹

This points to a need to transform ecclesial spaces where the faithful can explore the meaning of their lived experience, share their reflections, and articulate what it is like to live in mercy and grace in their conflicted states. This is particularly highlighted by Naomi in her experience of going to church on a regular basis. Here, the church "evangelizes and is herself evangelized through the beauty of the liturgy, which is both a celebration of the task of evangelization and the source of her renewed self-giving" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 24).³² This enlivens the life of the church, and calls the church to an ecclesial conversion to be open to a "constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ."³³ The end point of going to church is not to be a perfect Catholic but to grow into and with Christ, to be the light of the world plunged into darkness by troubled and wounded loves.

³¹ In this exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis highlights the importance of evangelization or the proclamation of God's goodness in the liturgy.

³² In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis calls for a church that takes the path of a "pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are" (no. 25).

³³ Pope Francis specifically cited the work of the Second Vatican Council on the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 6.

The Synod on the Family in 2014 recognized the significance of walking together with those in complex relationships, such as Naomi's. Here, the synod expressed the desire to "help them understand the divine pedagogy of grace in their lives and [offer] them assistance so they can reach the fullness of God's plan for something which is always possible by the power of the Holy Spirit" (*Relatio Synodi*, no. 25). Naomi could occupy this synodal space where she could share what she learned from her humble prayer to God and God's magnanimous response to her plea. Again, this highlights the view that although the bishops are guardians of the faith, the laity have also something to share about being "taught from above," a Johannine phrase that connotes being taught by God. In this regard, a synodal space could be a learning space where all the baptized, both clergy and laity, could exchange notes on how they were taught "from above." In the lived experience of Naomi, she was taught from above when she bowed down almost touching the ground. Could this be the space where God is found, not above but beneath us?

This chapter raises more questions than answers, because we are just beginning to reflect on a synodal space where "riotous differences" do not restrain the Spirit of God from breaking into the lives of those who call on God's mercy and grace through persistent prayer, humility, and hope. They need a just and hospitable space to grow in their emergent states with the community and with God.

How can the church host the people's groan for completion as they struggle to reclaim their worth and rebuild their lives?

Russell posits that hospitality is not only offered because one has a space to welcome the other.³⁴ Rather, it opens the space for the other to be able to explore their singularity and grow with the community. The lived experience shared by Naomi presents how she continues to carve a path via the liturgical life of the church in order to remain oriented to God. She stays in the church hoping that it could hold the space for her as she continues to rebuild her life under the shadow of God's mercy and grace.

³⁴ Russell, "Encountering the Other," 462.

In the midst of Naomi's fragmented life and broken vow, despite walking away from her marriage and finding herself in a same-sex union, Naomi experienced God's mercy that gave her strength to love and live again. It made her appreciate her value not only in the eyes of God but also in the eyes of her beloved partner. God's mercy is restorative. God's grace is life-giving, reorienting a life toward the good. In Naomi's desire to remain in the church, she makes a conscious effort to keep her relationship on a deeper level not only to abide by what the church teaches but to remain connected to God. She finds her voice and stakes her claim in a church as a woman of faith who broke away from an abusive marital situation and finds herself in a same-sex union. As could be gleaned from the interview, Naomi seems to think that people frown on her relationship because of its physical-union aspect. Hence, she seems to steer the discussion away from it and focuses instead on the value of the connection and friendship that develop from this union. The touch that restored her trust in her own body impels her to remain in church to become part of the body of Christ, broken, shared, and eaten.

The story of the hemorrhagic woman in the Synoptic Gospels comes to mind. The woman afflicted with this hemorrhagic condition came behind Jesus to touch his cloak believing that, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well" (Mark 5:28).³⁵ Like the hemorrhagic woman, Naomi may have the same hope that if she could only eat the body of Christ, she could be restored. Both actions are forbidden. Yet both audaciously reached out to Jesus believing that he could heal them.

The prayer posture of Naomi is almost like a fetal position that reaches out to the source of her life. Both her faith and her relationship with a lesbian restored her to life. Her story suggests that God's mercy and grace can cut through an "intrinsically evil" act. There is nothing and nowhere in this world that could not be touched by God. This is the recognition that hits Naomi in her guts. God's magnanimous response overshadows the enormity of her sins. Could the church take this bold option to love?

³⁵ Found in all Synoptic Gospels: Matthew 9:18–26, Mark 5:22–43, and Luke 8:41–56.

Or, at the very least, not obstruct God's movement toward those who seek God's mercy and grace. Could the church offer such hospitality to God?

Conclusion

Naomi opened up her life for scrutiny, inviting others to enter into her wounded and troubled love, challenging the notion of a "disordered act" that could not be oriented to God. Yet in her humble prayer, she is able to recognize and experience God's mercy and grace that fueled her faith and gave her hope. In both shared and personal spaces, Naomi continues to rebuild her life signaling the need for a synodal church that listens with and learns from one another. It is a learning space with a God who teaches not from above but from beneath them as experienced by Naomi who lowered herself, almost kissing the ground, for God's mercy. A hospitable church makes way for this God who crouches beside those who cry in anguish, weighed down by wounded and troubled love. A just hospitable synodal space does not obstruct divine justice that is founded on grace and mercy.

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