

the Church regarding the Theotokos by reading this book. Although it is not a scientifically written book, with a critical apparatus and bibliography, which could have increased its value and importance, the work presents with great depth the entire biblical, patristic, hymnographic, iconographic and theological teaching regarding who is the Theotokos, the Birth-Giver of God and the Virgin Mary for us the Christians.

**Rev. Lucian FARCAȘIU**

**D**r. Matthew LEVERING, *The Indissolubility of Marriage: Amoris Laetitia in Context*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2019, 220 pp.

A new, meticulously-researched book, *The Indissolubility of Marriage: Amoris Laetitia in Context* by Dr. Matthew Levering<sup>1</sup>, explains why the Catholic Church continues to teach marital indissolubility and addresses the numerous contemporary challenges to that teaching.

It surveys the patristic witness to marital indissolubility, along with Orthodox and Protestant views, as well as historical-critical biblical exegesis on the contested biblical passages. It also surveys the Catholic tradition from the Trent (1545 – 1563) through Benedict XVI (2005 – 2013), and it examines a Catholic argument that the Catholic Church's teaching can and should change. Then it explores *Amoris Laetitia*<sup>2</sup>, the papal exhortation from Pope Francis (2013 – present) on marriage (dated 19 March 2016), and the various major responses to it, with the issue of marital indissolubility at the forefront. Finally, it retrieves Aquinas's theology of marital indissolubility as a contribution to deepening current theological discussions

In this book, the author cannot give a full answer to the question of why the Catholic Church hold spouses to the obligations pertaining to a valid and consummated marital commitment. Such an answer would require exploring not

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Levering (born 1971), Ph.D. holds the James N. and Mary D. Perry Jr. Chair of Theology at Mundelein Seminary. He is the author or editor of over forty books on topics in dogmatic, sacramental, moral, historical, and biblical theology. He co-edits two quarterly journals, *Nova et Vetera* and *International Journal of Systematic Theology*.

<sup>2</sup> [https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/pa-pa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia\\_en.pdf](https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/pa-pa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf)

only the diverse components of a person's moral life, but also the relationship of indissoluble marriage to Christ's Paschal Mystery, to the self-surrendering Trinitarian life, to the marriage of Christ and the Church, to social justice and the good of children, and to other such topics.

Specifically, the author explores the doctrine of marital indissolubility in four chapters.

In the first chapter ("Eastern Orthodox, Patristic, Protestant and Historical – Critical Perspectives on Marital Indissolubility"), the author examines the positions taken by Eastern Orthodox and Protestant Christians on divorce and remarriage, with attention also to the Church Fathers' viewpoints and to the question of whether historical-critical biblical exegesis can help to overcome the disagreements. Although some scholars hold that study of the Church Fathers and of historical-critical exegesis tells against the Catholic doctrine of marital indissolubility, the author argues that the case is the opposite. Jesus strongly affirms marital indissolubility, more clearly than he does on almost any other Catholic teaching. The Church Fathers support the Catholic understanding of indissoluble marriage unanimously during the first three centuries of the Church. The majority of later Fathers, too, hold to the Catholic position as it crystallized through the interpretations of Jerome and Augustine.

In the second chapter ("Marital Indissolubility from Trent through Pope Benedict XVI"), given the efforts of some scholars to suggest that in fact the Catholic Church has never definitively taught marital indissolubility in a manner that excludes remarriage after divorce (without an annulment), Levering explores the relevant teachings on marital indissolubility offered by the Council of Trent (1545 – 1563), Pope Leo XIII (1878 – 1903), Pope Pius XI (1922 – 1939), Vatican II (1962 – 1965), Pope John Paul II (1978 – 2005) and Pope Benedict XVI (2005 – 2013). The author's conclusion is that the indissolubility of a valid and consummated Christian marriage has been definitively taught by the Church. For the Church to reject this teaching would cause a rupture that would throw many other Catholic doctrines into doubt. In this context, the author explores in some detail the argument of Kenneth Himes and James Coriden that the Catholic Church has not definitively taught marital indissolubility and that the doctrine should be revised to admit that a divorce dissolves a valid and consummated sacramental marriage<sup>3</sup>.

In the third chapter ("Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia* and Marital Indissolubility"), the author provides an overview of Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, in light of his letter to the bishops of the pastoral region, and in dialogue especially with the influential interpretations of Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, Francisco Cardinal Coccopalmerio, and Archbishop Vincent Fernandez. As the theologian Louis Cameli states, "*Amoris Laetitia*... assumes doctrine, moral teaching, law,

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth R. HIMES and James A. CORIDEN, "The Indissolubility of Marriage: Reasons to Reconsider", in: *Theological Studies* 65 (2004), pp. 453 – 499.

and basic pastoral care concerning marriage and family life. There are no changes, despite claims to the contrary”<sup>4</sup>. In accord with Cameli, the author emphasizes that not only does *Amoris Laetitia* affirm the indissolubility of marriage, but also, and equally importantly, the interpreters whose views have been explicitly commended by Pope Francis as indicative of his intentions in *Amoris Laetitia* have emphasized that the Catholic Church’s traditional teaching on marital indissolubility has not been changed. At same time, Levering note that the pastoral strategy advanced by the Argentine bishops and by cardinals Schönborn and Coccopalmerio does cause a tension: namely, what has happened to the obligations of the indissoluble marriage, such as the obligation of sexual exclusivity?

In the fourth chapter (“Theological Ressourcement: Aquinas on Marital Indissolubility”), given that a fundamental issue for marital indissolubility is whether it actually serves the good of believers in the merciful Lord Jesus Christ, the author undertake a ressourcement of the philosophical, exegetical and theological teachings of Aquinas on marital indissolubility. Levering focuses especially on Aquinas’ treatment of marital indissolubility as part of the created order (Mt. 19, 4 – 6) and on his analysis of the Matthean exception clause (Mt. 5, 32; 19, 9) and “Pauline privilege” (I Cor. 7, 15). The author seeks to explain why it makes sense that indissoluble Christian marriage belongs to the core of the merciful Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In *Conclusions*, the author set forth some brief considerations regarding the way forward, theologically and pastorally, for the Catholic doctrine of marital indissolubility. Dominik Cardinal Duka remarks that we should remember that the Cross of Christ, in which spouses share, is good for individuals and communities not because it is “the exaltation of torture”, but because it is “the exaltation of faithful love” and “the exaltation of keeping one’s word, of the oath that God gave to mankind”. Even in the midst of tragedies such as the experience of being abandoned by one’s spouse, cleaving to the Cross serves the good of individual persons because of the self – sacrificial love and the fidelity that the innocent spouse enacts in union with Christ and his Spirit. Recently, Rainer Beckmann has written a powerful testimony to the goodness of such fidelity. On the basis of his personal experience of being abandoned by his spouse after twenty-five years of marriage, he shows how and why it is that in Christ, “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5, 3 – 5).

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<sup>4</sup> Grant GALLICHO, James F. KEENAN, SJ, *Amoris Laetitia: A New Momentum for Moral Formation and Pastoral Practice*, Paulist Press, 2018, p. 28.