

Kamil Brożek – University of Silesia

Interview with prof. John Grabowski and his wife, Claire

Prof. John Grabowski – Ordinary Professor of Moral Theology and Ethics on the faculty of the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. He has served two terms as a theological advisor to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family, and Youth. In 2015 he was appointed by Pope Francis to serve as an expert at the Synod of Bishops on the Family. His main areas of research are moral theology, marriage, sexuality and bioethics. He and his wife, Claire, were appointed to the Pontifical Council for the Family by Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 where they served as a member couple. They together serve Christian faithful by helping young couples and families in troubles.

Kamil Brożek – *Silesia Superior*

Thank you for your openness to this meeting. First, I want to talk about the situation of the institution of family in the context of the United States. Do you think that family in current times is in harder situation than in previous generations?

Claire Grabowski

I definitely think that it is harder now to have a family and to raise children, and I'm grateful that I don't have to have teenage children during this time in our country. I have grandchildren and I pray very much for my own children to raise my grandchildren and be protected from what's going on in our country. The confusion regarding personhood of each person, with all those ideologies, culture fighting, abortion and religious freedom. It's not an easy place to have a family right now. It's very hard.

John Grabowski

I agree. I think in the United States, there's a lot of impact of individualism, so the people are more disconnected from each other. Families are more disconnected from extended family, from grandparents and uncles. So we have a very narrow conception of family. Another problem is materialism. People are focused on finding happiness and getting more things rather than relationships with people. I think that also the sexual revolution has done a great deal of damage in the United States, damaging the way people think about their fulfillment and happiness. People tend to think about marriage as an option for personal fulfillment instead of a chance to give themselves in love to another person. So in many ways, I think in church we're swimming against the culture in what we believe in, what we propose about marriage. Therefore, it's definitely harder. It's harder than it was for our parents, our grandparents and generations before them.

Claire Grabowski

One thing I'd like to add: Mother Mary's prediction at Fatima that Satan will be attacking us through the family. That's happening. I have no doubt.

John Grabowski

When the founder of the John Paul II Institute wrote to Sister Lucia, she reminded him that the Blessed Mother at Fatima predicted that the final battle would be over the family. And I think that's what we see right now in the culture. It's a battle over the family, a battle over marriage.

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You've said that the church is absolutely counter culture in in this area. Do you see allies, people who are not in the Catholic Church but might help in this fight?

John Grabowski

Certainly, I think other Christian churches, especially protestant churches that haven't tried to accommodate themselves to the sexual revolution and have stayed grounded in biblical faith. I think our allies are more traditional Jews and even Muslims. I think in some ways they're supportive of the vision of family that you can find within the church. But sometimes allies take interesting forms. I think there are even secular people who have no faith background at all who will at least resonate with aspects of what the Catholic Church teaches about marriage and family. I told my students this story: I had a lesbian mother from another part of the country in the United States. She and her lesbian partner had children in their local public school and their children were being taught gender ideology: that their bodies didn't matter, that they could choose their own gender identity. And this woman, without a faith background and a in a same-sex relationship, said this isn't right. She knew I had written a book on gender ideology, so she called the Catholic theologian in another part of the country and said: 'can you help me? Can you help me understand what I should be doing?'

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In terms of particular challenges you've mentioned, first I want to talk about is situation regarding abortion. Not long time ago we witnessed the overturning of *Roe v Wade*. Do you think it affected real families and marriages?

John Grabowski

I would say potentially, because it has enabled some states within the United States to actually set restrictions on abortion. But on the other hand, it has also stirred up people who support abortion to become more active, more vocal. It has also enabled chemical abortions that are very dangerous to woman. The rates of those have skyrocketed. Many people, if they live in a state in the US that has legal restrictions on abortion, they'll simply travel out of state for an abortion procedure. Some companies will even pay for their employees to do that. In some ways Supreme Court's decision intensified the battle. I think it has made pro-life people in the United States aware that we've been so focused on the national level, overturning *Roe v Wade*, we aren't as ready to engage in this battle on state level. I think we're now trying to catch up.

Claire Grabowski

The change on the national level, I think, has made people a little laxer. The pro-life march this year was not as crowded as usual. People didn't come because they thought 'oh, it's already done'. I'm afraid that some people are not going to be fighting as much because they think 'we've won the battle'.

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Do you think it is realistic to hope that some states that are adopting liberal policies on abortion could be swung in the opposite direction?

Claire Grabowski

There's always hope because we know God is victorious, so we do, yes. We have a daughter-in-law who is the pro-life director of a diocese in North Carolina, and states like hers are very strong and they're supporting her right. And I know there are other similar states. I think it's going to take a lot of prayer, trust and work, but I always have hope.

John Grabowski

I think in those states that are more liberal and more likely to have permissive abortion laws people who are pro-life need to engage. The way we're going to try to change people's hearts and minds is to show that we're committed to supporting women through difficult pregnancies and in raising their children. So, in other words, we might not be able to, certainly not at this point, change laws, but we can demonstrate people that we're not just trying to impose legal restrictions on their freedom. We're actually trying to help women and help children. So I think if that becomes clearer, that'll make an impact on some people.

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Do you think that it's more of a job for the government or for church and charities to make programs that will help women in need?

John Grabowski

I don't think the government's going to do it. Engaging the government is in the hope that we can, through the legislative process, get laws that support life. But in terms of supporting women, children and families, I think that's really the job of the church and pro-life groups and organizations. I don't think that the federal or state government in the United States will do that.

Claire Grabowski

I agree with John, but it would be wonderful if they did. If we could have the two working together, it would help so much.

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Moving on, I'd like to talk about a gender theory and great confusion about sex, gender and sexuality. It's sometimes hard to even tell where the battle is. Same-sex relationships became mainstream and now we talk about things like transgenderism. Do you think that the people of church understand the complexity of the problem and are up-to-date in this regard?

Claire Grabowski

I'm not as involved, because John is a theologian and is more involved in the church. But I am a mom and a grandmother and have friends who are experiencing this in their lives. They don't know where it came from. It just started happening. Big part of the problem are schools. Kids being told to keep secrets from parents. You can't know what's being taught in school anymore, at least in public schools. They can 'help' transgender children at school and then change them back to go home so they hide it from the parents. The parents need to be aware, that we can't trust public schools there. There's no truth being taught there. It's very sad.

John Grabowski

I was one of the English-speaking experts at the 2015 Synod on Family. One of the things that struck me was the number of bishops who, once they found out I had done research in this area, came to me and said: 'where did this come from and how do we respond to it? What do we do?' That's one of the reasons why I wrote a book on this, trying to update some of the research I did in my dissertation 30 years ago. There's been a slate over the last five years of very good books written by catholic authors, who are trying to engage in this. We need more people to be aware of what's going on. We need to give people a basic education in what is gender ideology and where does it come from. I think we're still realizing how did this go from an academic theory, held by people like Judith Butler and Michelle Foucault and a few others, to mainstream popular culture in the United States and Europe. And I think social media is part of that. Tumblr, TikTok – a lot of those platforms help these ideas go mainstream. So as Claire said, we need to equip clergy and parents with a basic understanding of what gender ideology is. And also, here's what we propose as an alternative: a Christian anthropology; that our bodies are good and they're integral part of who we are and their sexual differentiation is part of that gift. And we have wonderful resources like the *theology of the body* of John Paul II, which is an excellent antidote to the ideas of gender ideology. Not enough people are formed to be able to really engage in this, so that's where I think we need to go. We need to better form. This is one of Pope Francis's ideas. We need to better form the formators. We need to better form priests, seminarians, but also parents, so that they can be effective in forming children to combat some of these ideas. All of the social scientific data that we have tells us that people who fully transition are still battling with the pain of gender dysphoria that drove them to do this. The rates of suicide go up exponentially among people who have transitioned. It's using medical means to try to treat what is essentially a psychological condition. It is not good health care, and it doesn't lead to good outcomes for people. That's why some countries around the world like the UK, Scandinavia, Australia and New Zealand have banned these procedures being performed on children, because we don't have good evidence that this helps people. And that's a secular assessment, not a religious one.

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Do you think that it might be a natural form of rebellion for adolescents? It happens in every generation, but nowadays we have much more dangerous tools to rebel.

Claire Grabowski

I would not think that. I think they don't even have these thoughts in their head. If a young child is in school and is suffering with anxiety or depression and go to the counselor, he may hear: 'maybe you're not happy with who you are'. They are the ones who put these ideas in minds. And then they start to 'help' them. Little girls coming home and saying to their parents: 'did you know I could be a boy if I wanted to be?' They're being told this by people who have an agenda.

John Grabowski

I think that's true, and in fact there's a clinical name for this. It's called 'rapid onset gender dysphoria'. The studies show us that in the past decades the majority of people who were going for a 'sex change' procedures (which is a bad term because it doesn't change their biological sex) were middle-aged men who are unhappy with themselves and their lives, so they wanted to make themselves look like a woman, and they thought that would change some things. Today it's primarily young people, more young women than young men. Many of those young women or young men would be on the autism spectrum. So a lot of them are people who have wrestled with a feeling that they don't fit, there's something off about them. They come across this set of ideas that promises fixing all of that. 'You just have to go through this process and it will address all of that pain and not fitting in'. In the case of very young children who start going to schools, which help promote these ideas, they also watch children's entertainment, that's actively promoting these ideas in media. It's going to cause confusion for them. Every study that's been done shows that without any medical or psychological intervention, 80 to 85% of gender discordant children will outgrow it by the time they reach adulthood, just going through adolescence and puberty. For most people, that's enough to solidify their understanding of themselves as male or female. One last thought: I do think that well-intentioned parents and churches can exacerbate the problem by insisting too rigidly on certain gender roles. In other words, 'if you act in this way and you're a boy, there's something wrong with you'. Instead, they should've been saying: 'that's just the way you're a boy'. In case of a girl that likes sports and athletic competition – that doesn't mean you're actually a boy. It might just mean you're a girl who likes athletic competition and will grow up to be a woman who likes athletic competition, right? So insisting on rigid gender stereotypes does not help, and can actually make the problem a lot worse. That can be a problem with some people coming from a conservative religious background. So I think there are a lot of things that 'pump' these ideas out into the culture and create these problems. But I do think, as Claire said, a lot of it is kind of cultivated.

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I think we are starting to see some forms of pushback against these ideas, especially 'sex-changing' surgeries for children. I would like to ask: do you think of it as a success or as a threat? Because it might cause a situation that we, for example, outlaw the sex changes for children, but on the other hand we normalize those procedures for adults.

John Grabowski

That's a good point. I think if it's bad healthcare for children, it's bad healthcare for adults, right? But adults at least have the ability to make a more informed decision. I think starting by banning or restricting these procedures being done on children is a good step, but it should only be a first step. It's just as self-destructive for an adult. An adult who fully transitions destroys his fertility. He will be medicalized for the rest of his life. He has a body that no longer works, because these surgeries are so extensive and intense. I've heard stories told by people who have detransitioned who spoke of when they had fully transitioned. It took them 30 minutes to empty their bladder because of the all of the damage from the surgeries that they had undergone. How is that promoting human flourishing? So no, I think it's bad healthcare across the board, but I'll try to borrow some of Claire's optimism here. I'll see it as a good step to say 'no, we will not do this to children'. Children should have a voice in. They shouldn't be compelled by the adults in their life to undergo these drastic changes to their bodies. But that's only a first step. What we really need is to say 'no, this this isn't good healthcare for anyone'. But as *Dignitas infinita* does, and as the statement of the Doctrine Committee of the US Bishops says, we need to see that this is different than a person with, for example, an intersex condition, who goes for medical care (hormone therapy or surgery) to try to allow their body to more fully express it's given sex. Those are not the same, even though the procedures would be very similar.

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The last topic I want to talk about is individualism and materialism. I don't know how prominent this notion is in the United States, but from the outside, America seems to be built on an idea of personal freedom. 'It is my house, my lawn, my life'. We all can see how this can be damaging for the institution of family. How would you reformulate these foundational ideas of United States, so that they could suit family and not destroy it?

John Grabowski

I think John Paul II kind of pointed the way in *Veritatis splendor* when he contrasted what he called *participated theonomy* from *radical autonomy*. As moral agents, we are not radically autonomous, we're creatures of a loving God. We have to understand the way God made our nature and learn to live in accord with that. And the virtues that we're called to acquire enable us to flourish as human beings. That's *participated theonomy* – we are participating in the Creators design. I think you can make a parallel case here with the American ideal of rugged individualism. From a Christian perspective, you have to see that we are not to be an individual. To be a person is to exist in relation to others. In fact, that's where the term *person* comes from. It comes out of our Trinitarian theology in the early church and at the heart of that theology is relation. We know Father, Son and Spirit because of their mutual relations. We're made in the image and likeness of God, so therefore to be a person is to discover the relations at the basis of my existence. One is to God as a creature. But then my relations to others – my mother, father, brothers, sisters, husband, wife, children – those relations are constitutive to who I am as a person. I can only flourish as a person to the degree that I've learned to live out the truth of those relations. So we have to replace individualism with personalism. I don't think that materialism is easy to 'baptize'. I think one way to combat it from the perspective of the family is to realize that the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, obedience get lived out in

Christian families too. We're called to live a kind of poverty, to have a detachment. We have to be free from the desire to acquire stuff that the culture bombards us with – that's part of our freedom in Christ. But there's also obedience. John Paul II talks about the mutual submission of husband and wife to one another. And then there's also chastity – learning to order a couple sexual relationship in the service of life and love, as the church directs us to. So I think what we need to do is to rediscover evangelical counsels application within the family.

Claire Grabowski

I think the thing I would like to add is this: we're having a conversation and there's a phone right here, computer right there – these are part of our problems. Technology is a wonderful thing. But because of the materialism, especially in America, everybody has screens, everybody has access to people all over the world that are not in their family. But they don't make the time to have access to their family. There's no presence. Young people of this generation grew up with these screens and they don't know how to communicate, and it's very sad. I haven't seen it quite here as I do at home, but we take walks around our neighborhood and I'm a kind of person who loves to smile at people and make contact. People don't even look at me anymore. They're on their phones as they're walking, there're no relationships. But that's not just strangers, it's in the family. They sit at the dinner table and they're on their phone. The mom and dad are not present to their children, and they don't make their children be present to them. It's a vicious circle. And it's very, very sad. And it's destroying the family.

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From the perspective of the Church, how should we teach children these values? Some Christians are of an opinion that we should just adapt to current circumstances, including rites of liturgy and prayer.

John Grabowski

Pope Francis and *Amoris laetitia* talks about a need to better form priests, seminarians, but also parents. Parents are supposed to be the primary educators of their children. And even if they put their children in religious education or Catholic schools, they still have the primary responsibility to form those children, humanly and Christianly. What can the church do? It can better form parents, give them a vision and the tools, to say: 'you are the leaders of the domestic church, which is your family'. The Christian family is a little church, but most families don't live that way because they don't know how to live that way.

Claire Grabowski

As John said, Church needs to prepare parents, but it's very rare that you can go to a mass in America and hear a homily that's going to challenge you to live with these virtues. It's not talked about. We're not challenged. We're not reminded of how we are called to be a domestic church, how we're called to love and forgive each other. We need the help of the church. And they have to figure a way, using families, to catechize children and to catechize families. Somehow we have to work together. We haven't discovered how yet. The Pentecost is coming, so we have to beg the Lord to send his Holy Spirit and to give this grace to the church and to the families.

John Grabowski

I think you touched on something very important there. A lot of good priests in the church are afraid to say things in homilies that would challenge parents, because they'll hear things like 'father, go get your own house in order', alluding to various misconducts among the clergy. So they just find it easier not to touch on challenging subjects and not to preach on it. That's not the answer, because that just means people are being formed more by the culture than by the faith. We as families need to be reminded of the virtues we're called to live by. But priests need to be reminded that they need to be good shepherds. St. Stanislaus, pray for us. We need people who are willing to speak the truth, but also to acknowledge their own failures. Not in a moralizing or clericalist way, but a way that really says: 'we're all called to holiness, we're all called to that same standard, so we need to begin to live out those virtues'.

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We in Poland don't see yet the full fruits of sexual revolution and all those ideologies. But we see that they're coming. From your experiences in the United States, what would you tell to us? What to avoid? How to prevent those negative outcomes that you see in America?

John Grabowski

There's so much I would say. I would start with this: don't foolishly think you can compromise and accommodate some of the ideals of the sexual revolution. This is what mainstream Protestant churches did in Europe and in the United States. Mary Eberstadt, an American Catholic social scientist, calls this *Christianity light*. We can find good things to say about the sexual revolution, for example some new sexual freedoms. But then we won't focus on the big picture. All it did was empty those churches because people don't find any difference between those churches and the culture around them. So that's the first thing. Don't do this. Mary even argues in some of her books that the sexual revolution is a competing religion. It is a secular religion which is meant to compete with Christianity, and abortion is its primary sacrament. So to think that you can compromise or accommodate – you can't any more than the church has been able to compromise or accommodate Gnosticism. This is just another heresy that's opposed to the whole of our vision of the human person. What can you do to prepare? Realize that compromise is not an option. Ground yourselves and the people in the church around you in an authentic vision of the human person and the gift of the body and sexuality. Theology of the body is a wonderful resource. A number of people have argued that Karol Wojtyła articulated his anthropology, his vision of the human person, as a response to the industrial revolution, the sexual revolution, and the ongoing technological revolution that Claire referenced. And I think that's right. We're in a new context in the modern world, there are new challenges and dangers and the chief among those dangers is a faulty understanding of who we are. *Gaudium et spes* says that without the Creator, the creature itself disappears. When we forget God, we have no idea who we are, and that's what the sexual revolution and gender ideology cause us to do. To forget who we are.

Claire Grabowski

The only thing I would add is to remember the gifts – the sacraments, the graces church has for us. That's where we are given the gift. We have an obligation to become holy. Also remember the gifts of reconciliation. We can go to confession as often as we need to. And we get grace

on that. The gift of intercession and sitting before the Blessed Sacrament... In the United States this is the year of the Eucharist where we're doing a Eucharistic Revival. We're trying to remind people of what the Eucharist is. It's the true presence of God. We have God present in our hearts, we have the Trinity living in us, but we can also go and have the true presence in the Eucharist anytime we want, and it gives grace to us. I have learned over the years that the Evil One is attacking and the best thing I can do is to pray for protection for everyone. We pray our rosaries for so many things. We've been given the gifts and the tools; we need to remember to use them.

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Thank you for your time and sharing your reflections.