

Summary of *Amoris Laetitia: On Love in the Family*

It is not by chance that *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), “The Joy of Love”, the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation “on Love in the Family”, was signed on 19 March, the Solemnity of Saint Joseph. It brings together the results of the two Synods on the family convoked by Pope Francis in 2014 and 2015. It often cites their *Final Reports*; documents and teachings of his Predecessors; and his own numerous catecheses on the family. In addition, as in previous magisterial documents, the Pope also makes use of the contributions of various Episcopal Conferences around the world (Kenya, Australia, Argentina...) and cites significant figures such as Martin Luther King and Erich Fromm. The Pope even quotes the film *Babette’s Feast* to illustrate the concept of gratuity.

Introduction (1-7)

The Apostolic Exhortation is striking for its breadth and detail. Its 325 paragraphs are distributed over nine chapters. The seven *introductory paragraphs* plainly set out the complexity of a topic in urgent need of thorough study. The interventions of the Synod Fathers make up [form] a “multifaceted gem” (AL 4), a precious polyhedron, whose value must be preserved. But the Pope cautions that “not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium”. Indeed, for some questions, “each country or region ... can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For ‘cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle ... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied’” (AL 3). This principle of inculturation applies to how problems are formulated and addressed and, apart from the dogmatic issues that have been well defined by the Church’s magisterium, none of this approach can be “globalized”. In his address at the end of the 2015 Synod, the Pope said very clearly: “What seems normal for a bishop on one continent, is considered strange and almost scandalous – almost! – for a bishop from another; what is considered a violation of a right in one society is an evident and inviolable rule in another; what for some is freedom of conscience is for others simply confusion.”

The Pope clearly states that we need above all to avoid a sterile juxtaposition between demands for change and the general application of abstract norms. He writes: “The debates carried on in the media, in certain publications and even among the Church’s ministers, range from an immoderate desire for total change without sufficient reflection or grounding, to an attitude that would solve everything by applying general rules or deriving undue conclusions from particular theological considerations” (AL 2).

Chapter One: “In the light of the Word” (8-30)

Following this introduction, the Pope begins his reflections with the Holy Scriptures in the *first chapter*, which unfolds as a meditation on Psalm 128 (which appears in the Jewish wedding liturgy as well as that of Christian marriages). The Bible “is full of families, births, love stories and family crises” (AL 8). This impels us to meditate on how the family is not an abstract ideal but rather like a practical “trade” (AL 16), which is carried out with tenderness (AL 28), but which has also been confronted with sin from the beginning, when the relationship of love turned into domination (cf. AL 19). Hence, the Word of God “is not a series of abstract ideas but rather a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties or suffering. For it shows them the goal of their journey...” (AL 22).

Chapter two: “The experiences and challenges of families” (31-57)

Building on the biblical base, in the *second chapter* the Pope considers the current situation of families. While keeping “firmly grounded in [the] reality” of family experiences (AL 6), he also draws heavily on the final Reports of the two Synods. Families face many challenges, from migration to the ideological denial of differences between the sexes (“ideology of gender” AL 56); from the culture of the provisional to the antibirth mentality and the impact of biotechnology in the field of procreation; from the lack of housing and work to pornography and abuse of minors; from inattention to persons with disabilities, to lack of respect for the elderly; from the legal dismantling of the family, to violence against women. The Pope insists on concreteness, which is a key concept in the Exhortation. And it is concreteness, realism and daily life that make up the substantial difference between acceptable “theories” of interpretation of reality and arbitrary “ideologies”.

Citing *Familiaris consortio*, Francis states that “we do well to focus on concrete realities, since ‘the call and the demands of the Spirit resound in the events of history’, and through these ‘the Church can also be guided to a more profound understanding of the inexhaustible mystery of marriage and the family’” (AL 31). Conversely, if we fail to listen to reality, we cannot understand the needs of the present or the movements of the Spirit. The Pope notes that rampant individualism makes it difficult today for a person to give oneself generously to another (cf. AL 33). Here is an interesting picture of the situation: “The fear of loneliness and the desire for stability and fidelity exist side by side with a growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that could hamper the achievement of one’s personal goals” (AL 34).

The humility of realism helps us to avoid presenting “a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families” (AL 36). Idealism does not allow marriage to be understood for what it is, that is, a “dynamic path to personal development and fulfilment”. It is unrealistic to think that families can sustain themselves “simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace” (AL 37). Calling for a certain “self-criticism” of approaches that are inadequate for the experience of marriage and the family, the Pope stresses the need to make room for the formation of the conscience of the faithful: “We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them” (AL 37). Jesus proposed a demanding ideal but “never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery” (AL 38).

Chapter three: “Looking to Jesus: The vocation of the family” (58-88)

The *third chapter* is dedicated to some essential elements of the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family. This chapter is important because its 30 paragraphs concisely depict the vocation of the family according to the Gospel and as affirmed by the Church over time. Above all, it stresses the themes of indissolubility, the sacramental nature of marriage, the transmission of life and the education of children. *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II, *Humanae Vitae* of Paul VI, and *Familiaris Consortio* of John Paul II are widely quoted.

The chapter provides a broad view and touches on “imperfect situations” as well. We can read, in fact: “Discernment of the presence of ‘seeds of the Word’ in other cultures (cf. *Ad Gentes* 11) can also apply to the reality of marriage and the family. In addition to true natural marriage, positive elements exist in the forms of marriage found in other religious traditions’, even if, at times, obscurely” (AL 77). The reflection also includes the “wounded families” about whom the Pope – quoting the *Final Report* of the 2015 Synod extensively – says that “it is always necessary to recall this general principle: ‘Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations’

(*Familiaris Consortio*, 84). The degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases and factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision. Therefore, while clearly stating the Church's teaching, pastors are to avoid judgements that do not take into account the complexity of various situations, and they are to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience and endure distress because of their condition" (AL 79).

Chapter four: "Love in marriage" (89-164)

The *fourth chapter* treats love in marriage, which it illuminates with Saint Paul's *Hymn to Love* in 1 *Corinthians* 13:4-7. This opening section is truly a painstaking, focused, inspired and poetic exegesis of the Pauline text. It is a collection of brief passages carefully and tenderly describing human love in absolutely concrete terms. The quality of psychological introspection that marks this exegesis is striking. The psychological insights enter into the emotional world of the spouses – positive and negative – and the erotic dimension of love. This is an extremely rich and valuable contribution to Christian married life, unprecedented in previous papal documents.

This section digresses briefly from the more extensive, perceptive treatment of the day-to-day experience of married love which the Pope refuses to judge against ideal standards: "There is no need to lay upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union existing between Christ and his Church, for marriage as a sign entails 'a dynamic process..., one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God'" (AL 122). On the other hand, the Pope forcefully stresses the fact that conjugal love by its very nature defines the partners in a richly encompassing and lasting union (AL 123), precisely within that "mixture of enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures" (AL 126) which indeed make up a marriage.

The chapter concludes with a very important reflection on the "transformation of love" because "Longer life spans now mean that close and exclusive relationships must last for four, five or even six decades; consequently, the initial decision has to be frequently renewed" (AL 163). As physical appearance alters, the loving attraction does not lessen but changes as sexual desire can be transformed over time into the desire for togetherness and mutuality: "There is no guarantee that we will feel the same way all through life. Yet if a couple can come up with a shared and lasting life project, they can love one another and live as one until death do them part, enjoying an enriching intimacy" (AL 163).

Chapter five: "Love made fruitful" (165-198)

The *fifth chapter* is entirely focused on love's fruitfulness and procreation. It speaks in a profoundly spiritual and psychological manner about welcoming new life, about the waiting period of pregnancy, about the love of a mother and a father. It also speaks of the expanded fruitfulness of adoption, of welcoming the contribution of families to promote a "culture of encounter", and of family life in a broad sense which includes aunts and uncles, cousins, relatives of relatives, friends. *Amoris laetitia* does not focus on the so-called "nuclear" family" because it is very aware of the family as a wider network of many relationships. The spirituality of the sacrament of marriage has a deeply social character (cf. AL 187). And within this social dimension the Pope particularly emphasizes the specific role of the relationship between youth and the elderly, as well as the relationship between brothers and sisters as a training ground for relating with others.

Chapter six: "Some pastoral perspectives" (199-258)

In the *sixth chapter* the Pope treats various pastoral perspectives that are aimed at forming solid

and fruitful families according to God's plan. The chapter uses the *Final Reports* of the two Synods and the catecheses of Pope Francis and Pope John Paul II extensively. It reiterates that families should not only be evangelized, they should also evangelize. The Pope regrets "that ordained ministers often lack the training needed to deal with the complex problems currently facing families" (AL 202). On the one hand, the psycho-affective formation of seminarians needs to be improved, and families need to be more involved in formation for ministry (cf. AL 203); and on the other hand, "the experience of the broad oriental tradition of a married clergy could also be drawn upon" (AL 202).

The Pope then deals with the preparation of the engaged for marriage; with the accompaniment of couples in the first years of married life, including the issue of responsible parenthood; and also with certain complex situations and crises, knowing that "each crisis has a lesson to teach us; we need to learn how to listen for it with the ear of the heart" (AL 232). Some causes of crisis are analysed, among them a delay in maturing affectively (cf. AL 239).

Mention is furthermore made of accompanying abandoned, separated or divorced persons. The Exhortation stresses the importance of the recent reform of the procedures for marriage annulment. It highlights the suffering of children in situations of conflict and concludes: "Divorce is an evil and the increasing number of divorces is very troubling. Hence, our most important pastoral task with regard to families is to strengthen their love, helping to heal wounds and working to prevent the spread of this drama of our times" (AL 246). It then touches on the situations of a marriage between a Catholic and a Christian of another denomination (mixed marriages), and between a Catholic and someone of another religion (disparity of cult). Regarding families with members with homosexual tendencies, it reaffirms the necessity to respect them and to refrain from any unjust discrimination and every form of aggression or violence. The last, pastorally poignant part of the chapter, "When death makes us feel its sting", is on the theme of the loss of dear ones and of widowhood.

Chapter seven: "Towards a better education of children" (259-290)

The *seventh chapter* is dedicated to the education of children: their ethical formation, the learning of discipline which can include punishment, patient realism, sex education, passing on the faith and, more generally, family life as an educational context. The practical wisdom present in each paragraph is remarkable, above all the attention given to those gradual, small steps "that can be understood, accepted and appreciated" (AL 271).

There is a particularly interesting and pedagogically fundamental paragraph in which Francis clearly states that "obsession, however, is not education. We cannot control every situation that a child may experience... If parents are obsessed with always knowing where their children are and controlling all their movements, they will seek only to dominate space. But this is no way to educate, strengthen and prepare their children to face challenges. What is most important is the ability lovingly to help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy" (AL 260).

The notable section on education in sexuality is very expressively entitled: "Yes to sex education". The need is there, and we have to ask "if our educational institutions have taken up this challenge ... in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialized and impoverished". Sound education needs to be carried out "within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving" (AL 280). The text warns that the expression 'safe sex' conveys "a negative attitude towards the natural procreative finality of sexuality, as if an eventual child were an enemy to be protected against. This way of thinking promotes narcissism and aggressivity in place of acceptance" (AL 283).

Chapter eight: “Guiding, discerning and integrating weakness” (291-312)

The *eighth chapter* is an invitation to mercy and pastoral discernment in situations that do not fully match what the Lord proposes. The Pope uses three very important verbs: *guiding*, *discerning* and *integrating*, which are fundamental in addressing fragile, complex or irregular situations. The chapter has sections on the need for gradualness in pastoral care; the importance of discernment; norms and mitigating circumstances in pastoral discernment; and finally what the Pope calls the “logic of pastoral mercy”.

Chapter eight is very sensitive. In reading it one must remember that “the Church’s task is often like that of a field hospital” (AL 291). Here the Holy Father grapples with the findings of the Synods on controversial issues. He reaffirms what Christian marriage is and adds that “some forms of union radically contradict this ideal, while others realize it in at least a partial and analogous way”. The Church therefore “does not disregard the constructive elements in those situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage” (AL 292).

As far as discernment with regard to “irregular” situations is concerned, the Pope states: “There is a need ‘to avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situations’ and ‘to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition’” (AL 296). And he continues: “It is a matter of reaching out to everyone, of needing to help each person find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community, and thus to experience being touched by an ‘unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous’ mercy” (AL 297). And further: “The divorced who have entered a new union, for example, can find themselves in a variety of situations, which should not be pigeonholed or fit into overly rigid classifications leaving no room for a suitable personal and pastoral discernment” (AL 298).

In this line, gathering the observations of many Synod Fathers, the Pope states that “the baptized who are divorced and civilly remarried need to be more fully integrated into Christian communities in the variety of ways possible, while avoiding any occasion of scandal”. “Their participation can be expressed in different ecclesial services... Such persons need to feel not as excommunicated members of the Church, but instead as living members, able to live and grow in the Church... This integration is also needed in the care and Christian upbringing of their children” (AL 299).

In a more general vein, the Pope makes an extremely important statement for understanding the orientation and meaning of the Exhortation: “If we consider the immense variety of concrete situations, ... it is understandable that neither the Synod nor this Exhortation could be expected to provide a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases. What is needed is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases, one which would recognize that, since ‘the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases’, the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same” (AL 300). The Pope develops in depth the needs and characteristics of the journey of accompaniment and discernment necessary for profound dialogue between the faithful and their pastors.

For this purpose the Holy Father recalls the Church’s reflection on “mitigating factors and situations” regarding the attribution of responsibility and accountability for actions; and relying on St. Thomas Aquinas, he focuses on the relationship between rules and discernment by stating: “It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations. At the same time, it must be said that, precisely for that reason, what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule” (AL 304).

The last section of the chapter treats “The logic of pastoral mercy”. To avoid misunderstandings,

Pope Francis strongly reiterates: “To show understanding 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 being. Today, *more important than the pastoral care of failures is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages* and thus to prevent their breakdown” (AL 307).

The overall sense of the chapter and of the spirit that Pope Francis wishes to impart to the pastoral work of the Church is well summed up in the closing words: “I encourage the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors or with other lay people whose lives are committed to the Lord. They may not always encounter in them a confirmation of their own ideas or desires, but they will surely receive some light to help them better understand their situation and discover a path to personal growth. I also encourage the Church’s pastors to listen to them with sensitivity and serenity, with a sincere desire to understand their plight and their point of view, in order to help them live better lives and to recognize their proper place in the Church.” (AL 312).

On the “logic of pastoral mercy”, Pope Francis emphasizes: “At times we find it hard to make room for God’s unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel” (AL 311).

Chapter nine: “The spirituality of marriage and the family” (313-325)

The *ninth chapter* is devoted to marital and family spirituality, which “is made up of thousands of small but real gestures” (AL 315). The Pope clearly states that “those who have deep spiritual aspirations should not feel that the family detracts from their growth in the life of the Spirit, but rather see it as a path which the Lord is using to lead them to the heights of mystical union” (AL 316). Everything, “moments of joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection” (AL 317). He then speaks of prayer in the light of Easter, of the spirituality of exclusive and free love in the challenge and the yearning to grow old together, reflecting God’s fidelity (cf. AL 319). And finally the spirituality of *care, consolation and incentive*: the Pope teaches that “all family life is a ‘shepherding’ in mercy. Each of us, by our love and care, leaves a mark on the life of others” (AL 322). It is a profound “spiritual experience to contemplate our loved ones with the eyes of God and to see Christ in them” (AL 323).

In the final paragraph the Pope affirms: “No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love ... All of us are called to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families, and every family must feel this constant impulse. Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together. (...) May we never lose heart because of our limitations, or ever stop seeking that fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us” (AL 325).

The Apostolic Exhortation concludes with a Prayer to the Holy Family.

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As can readily be understood from a quick review of its contents, the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* seeks emphatically to affirm not the “ideal family” but the very rich and complex reality of family life. Its pages provide an openhearted look, profoundly positive, which is nourished not with abstractions or ideal projections, but with pastoral attention to reality. The text is a close reading of family life, with spiritual insights and practical wisdom useful for every human couple or persons who want to build a family. Above all, it is patently the result of attention to what people have lived over

many years. The Exhortation *Amoris laetitia: On Love in the Family* indeed speaks the language of experience and of hope.