

Special Report: *Amoris Laetitia*

On Friday, April 8, 2016, Pope Francis released his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, or “The Joy of Love.” Pope Francis issued *Amoris Laetitia* in response to both the Third Extraordinary and the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops in 2014 and 2015 respectively. Specifically, the pope wanted to “gather the contributions of the two recent Synods on the family, while adding other considerations as an aid to reflection, dialogue and pastoral practice, and as a help and encouragement to families in their daily commitments and challenges.”

The Exhortation in Brief

Pope Francis relies heavily on the final documents of the two aforementioned synods. In fact, the exhortation can be considered to be a strong affirmation of their conclusions. Throughout the work, he incorporates substantial sections of the two synods on the family.

He begins “The Joy of Love” with an examination of Scripture with its stories of families, births, love, and family crises. A substantial portion of this first chapter is devoted to a reflection on the first six verses of Psalm 128. He moves on to a consideration of the concrete realities that threaten and challenge the family in today’s world in chapter two: less support from social structures, extreme individualism, the speed and organization of life, migration, drug use, and pornography to name just a few. In the face of these, Pope Francis encourages the faithful to both set forth Jesus’ demanding ideal, and yet never fail “to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery.”

The next chapter summarizes the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family. He also re-emphasizes the need to love those who participate in the life of the Church in an imperfect manner. This sets the stage for two chapters on love. Chapter four contains a beautiful reflection on 1 Corinthians 13:2-7. Pope Francis as pastor is in full relief here. In it, he demonstrates a deep understanding and sensitivity to the life of love as expressed in marriage and family. Chapter five then challenges the reader to look at his or her own attitudes on pregnancy, children, parents and the elderly.

Pope Francis follows his expositions on love with some pastoral perspectives. In chapter six, he puts forth general recommendations for the formation of priests, religious, laity and seminarians in matters of family. He also affirms the Church’s teaching on same-sex attraction: calling for respect for the dignity of those who have this attraction, condemning any unjust discrimination against these persons, and recognizing that same-sex unions cannot be placed at the same level as marriage. He next turns his attention to the education of children, including sex education, in chapter seven. In particular, he points out that the moral formation of children can never completely be delegated to others. It always remains primarily the duty of the parents.

Chapter eight outlines the Church’s approach to those who participate in her life in an incomplete manner: accompanying, discerning, and integrating weakness. Pope Francis rejects the “casting off” of those in “irregular” situations. Instead, he opts always for “reinstatement.” Throughout the chapter, he echoes the pastoral recommendations put forth by the synods in

terms of, for example, the separated and divorced and the divorced and civilly remarried. He says of these people, ““Hence it is can no longer simply be said that all those in any ‘irregular’ situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace” (301). Could the Church’s minister, therefore, not help such people, in the privacy of the rectory parlor or the confessional, to discern their degree of moral responsibility?”

The exhortation closes with a consideration of the spirituality of marriage and family. Pope Francis grounds this spirituality in the communion of the Holy Trinity; Easter; and freedom, care, consolation and incentive. He leaves us with this reminder, “no family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love.”

SIDEBAR: THE SPIRIT OF ST. IGNATIUS

Amoris Laetitia offers the reader a tremendous amount of content to reflect upon. In fact, reading the exhortation could qualify as entering into spiritual direction. In all, the exhortation seems to be the direct fruit of the pope’s Jesuit formation.

For example, *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), were written mainly to foster the development of discernment, in particular the ability to discern between good and evil spirits. *The Exercises* demand humility, selflessness and the recognition of one’s only sinfulness in order to discern the path to glorify God rather than oneself.

For St. Ignatius, discernment attempts to connect one’s thoughts and actions with the Grace of God. Pope Francis seems to share this aim in *Amoris Laetitia*, as each page invites the reader to join Pope Francis on a journey of discovery to the central truths about God, the Church, marriage and family.

SIDEBAR: DID YOU KNOW...

An Apostolic Exhortation does not define Church doctrine and is considered less authoritative than papal encyclicals. However, it is still more authoritative than other papal issuances such as audiences and homilies.

SIDEBAR: “LITTLE” THINGS MEAN A LOT

Pope Francis writes, “The spirituality of family love is made up of thousands of small but real gestures.” So it makes sense that he would encourage young married couples to develop a healthy sense of closeness and stability through shared daily rituals such as:

- a morning kiss;
- an evening blessing;
- waiting at the door to welcome each other home;
- taking trips together; and
- sharing household chores.

At the same time, he acknowledges the need to balance such routine with special celebrations and events in order to renew “our zest for life.” (226)

SIDEBAR: FROM THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS...

“The pope has given us a love letter to families – a love letter inviting all of us, and especially married couples and families, to never stop growing in love ... I encourage all to read and reflect on how the words of Pope Francis can be applied in our lives, in our families, and in our society.”

- Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Amoris Laetitia brings “a rich reflection on the mission of the family and on how the Church can equip couples to embrace God’s vision for marriage and can offer healing for families who are struggling ... [it is] an inspirational aid for the clergy and laity who generously accompany couples as they prepare for marriage and throughout their married life, in both their joys and difficulties.”

- Bishop Richard J. Malone of Buffalo, New York, Chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth

SIDEBAR: EXCERPTS FROM AMORIS LAETITIA

On the family:

“Families are not a problem; they are first and foremost an opportunity.” (7)

“The welfare of the family is decisive for the future of the world and that of the Church.” (31)

“We should not be trapped into wasting our energy in doleful laments, but rather seek new forms of missionary creativity.” (57)

“The family is the image of God, who is a communion of persons.”(71)

“In the family, ‘three words need to be used. I want to repeat this! Three words: “Please”, “Thank you”, “Sorry”. Three essential words!” (133)

“All family life is a ‘shepherding’ in mercy.” (322)

On marriage:

“Marital love is not defended primarily by presenting indissolubility as a duty, or by repeating doctrine, but by helping it to grow ever stronger under the impulse of grace.” (134)

“Love always gives life.” (165)

“Each marriage is a kind of ‘salvation history’, which from fragile beginnings – thanks to God’s gift and a creative and generous response on our part – grows over time into something precious and enduring.” (221)

On the Church:

“Seeing things with the eyes of Christ...the Church turns with love to those who participate in her life in an imperfect manner: she seeks the grace of conversion for them; she encourages them to do good; to take loving care of each other and to serve the community in which they live and work...” (78)

“We have to realize that all of us are a complex mixture of light and shadows.” (113)

“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.” (297)