

PRESENTATION OF THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION

AMORIS LAETITIA

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The Family at the Center of Our Attention

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis has collected what the Church has learned from its long and wide-ranging study of the family (including a Consistory of Cardinals, two Synods of Bishops preceded by world-wide consultations, and almost all his weekly audience talks in 2015) and he has presented them authoritatively to the whole Catholic Church. Few Papal documents have had the benefit of such extensive preparation and input.

In the document, the Pope makes clear the new relationship that the Church must have with today's families in their concrete reality. Harking back to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, we can say that today the Church is called on to make its own the "*enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures*" (§126) of today's families. Reading these words, we hear the echo of the opening sentence of *Gaudium et Spes*, which is among the most well known of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. We can see that there is a common thread that links *Gaudium et Spes* with *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Pope's 2013 Exhortation, *Laudato Si*, his 2015 Encyclical on the environment, and *Amoris Laetitia*. In all those documents we feel "that immense sympathy" that Blessed Paul VI spoke of when referring to the sensitivity that characterized the work of the Church in Vatican II.

The Papal document, even as it points out the profound changes that have taken place with respect to families in recent decades, still looks on families with great sympathy to help them live the joy of their vocation and mission. The Pope does not offer new definitions of "family." To the contrary, he emphasizes that "*in no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God's plan in all its grandeur.*" (§307) On the other hand, accepting

reality, he says that *“no family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love.”* (§325). And he recognizes that *“Some forms of union radically contradict [the ideal of marriage], while others realize that ideal in at least a partial and analogous way.”* (§292)

Faced with these new realities, the Pope asks the Church to look at families in a new light, but always within a strategic vision. Pope Francis emphasizes that the family is not just about individuals and their longing for love (which of course is present); it is about the very history of the world. In a sense, the family is what gives birth to all relationships. And in the light of this strategic vision a change of pace is called for, one that goes to the very shape of the Church, that makes it act more like a family. Only if the Church is a family can it understand and help all families.

The Pope knows that it is not easy or inevitable to welcome the approach he calls for, but he doesn't want any misunderstanding. He knows that there are those, even among committed believers, who would like the Church to be a sort of courtroom of life and human history, to be a Church that accuses, a clerk who records transgressions and compliance without taking into account the painful circumstances of life or the difficult choices we have to make. That view forgets that the Church has been commissioned by the Lord to be courageous and strong in its protection of the weak, in forgiving wrongs, in healing the wounds of fathers, mothers, children, brothers and sisters—starting with those who realize that they are prisoners of their own failings, and who are in despair for having ruined their lives.

The document calls for a new approach to thinking about the Church, a new alliance between families and the Church: *“The family is thus an agent of pastoral activity through its explicit proclamation of the Gospel and its legacy of varied forms of witness, namely solidarity with the poor, openness to a diversity of people, the protection of creation, moral and material solidarity with other families, including those most in need, commitment to the promotion of the common good and the transformation of unjust social structures, beginning in the territory in which the family lives, through the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.”* (§290)

The Structure and Fundamental Themes of the Document.

In the first three Chapters after the Introduction, the Exhortation examines the family from three points of view. The first presents the families whom we know from the Bible, and we learn of their stories, which are characterized by “love and crises.” (cf. §8)

The second looks at today’s families and the challenges they are called on to face: from migration, to the ideological denial of differences between the sexes (“gender ideology”); from a culture of planned obsolescence, to campaigns in favor of zero population growth and reproduction-related biotechnologies; from housing shortages and unemployment, to pornography and abuse of minors; from care for persons with disabilities, to respect for the elderly; from judicial deconstruction of the family, to violence against women. The document, moreover, presents all-consuming individualism as a poison that destroys families at their roots. A culture of narcissism leads families to a paradoxical 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.”* (§34) That is the paradox between the radical need for family that all experience and the growing fragility of family bonds that disappear, that break, that reconstitute themselves, all as the parties choose.

In the third Chapter, the Pope presents the vocation of the family as described by Jesus and embraced by the Church. He discusses the indissolubility of marriage and its sacramentality. He discusses its fruitfulness and the rearing of children. Among other things the Pope—in a conscious self-criticism—asks the Church whether at times we have made the mistake of presenting *“a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families.”* (§36) He reveals all his doubts about the effectiveness of a pastoral approach that insists on *“doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace.”* (§37)

Chapters Four and Five are the heart of the Exhortation. They examine the substance of Holy Matrimony and the family, namely, the bond of love between a man and a woman and the generative fruitfulness that follows from it. Here the document presents a unique new approach. The Pope does not (as is commonly done in marriage catechesis) limit himself to commenting only on The Song of Songs and its fundamental lesson—which of course is a jewel of Biblical revelation about the love between man and woman. He goes further. In Chapter Four, he comments in a completely original way, and word by word, on the subtle phenomenology of God-inspired love in the beautiful Pauline hymn in First Corinthians, Chapter 13. The Pope

points out how love—every love—flows from and reflects the depth and concreteness of the love that is God. He speaks of love in terms that are in no way simply mystical and romantic. The love of which the text speaks is marked by concreteness, by interaction, by beauty, by sacrifice, by vulnerability and by tenacity (“*love bears all, hopes all, believes all, forgives all, endures to the last*”). And it appears that the Pope is saying that God’s own love is just like that! We are far from that individualism that shuts love up in an obsessive “just us” situation that endangers the “joy” of the marital and family bond. The Pope’s lexicon of family love is rich in passion, robust in fruitfulness.

In Chapter Five, after speaking of love in the preceding Chapter, the Pope turns his attention to the second dimension of the marital relationship—fruitfulness and the generation of new life. He speaks with spiritual and psychological depth about welcoming new life, about the time of waiting for a new baby to arrive, about the love of a mother and father, about the presence of grandparents. He speaks as well of fruitfulness in a larger sense—adoption, grandparents, extended family—all these promote a “culture of encounter” in families with the presence of uncles and aunts, cousins, in-laws, friends.

In this context, I would like to emphasize two points. First of all, children. The document states clearly that a child is not simply the result of desire. The child is a participant in God’s plan for passing on life. Second, from this realization comes the question of the relationship between generations, which family fragmentation and the passing nature of sexual love put at risk. The relationship between generations is where heredity must become fruitful. The Pope highlights the necessary social dimension of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony (§186) which includes the relationship between young and old, as well as that between brothers and sisters, which is a preparation for growth in our ability to relate to others. This is the great task entrusted to the family. It must treasure life’s traditions without imprisoning them, and it must give added value to the future without rendering it lifeless.

This dynamism is not possible if the family loses its societal role of stability and vigorous affectivity. Put briefly, the family is the engine of history, it is not a refuge from its challenges. The entire wealth of peoples—knowledge, culture, traditions, gift and reciprocity—is built into the relationship and alliance between the generations. The passion for passing on wisdom (which is the hallmark of intergenerational solidarity), and the alliance between generations, are an accurate thermometer of social progress.

Chapter Seven is to be read attentively because it deals with education. Education is one of the most important of today's challenges but also one of the most neglected. We hear often of the "disappearance" of fathers and the absence of mothers, or of their "resignation" from the job of educating their children. But the Pope also asks us to be aware of the opposite: *"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."* (§261) The attention that the document gives to sexual education is also significant. It is something relatively new in the Church's pastoral activity. The Exhortation says that it is particularly necessary today, *"in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialized and impoverished."* (§280) Further, it is to be implemented *"... within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving."* (§280)

In this presentation I will not discuss Chapter VIII at length. It deals with pastoral discernment in the face of situations that do not fully conform to what the Lord preaches about Holy Matrimony and the family. The Pope repeats that the Church must in no way cease to illuminate the truth of the faith, and he understands the heavy demands that discipleship makes of believers. On the other hand, he asks us to look on others as Jesus does and to be aware of how God has clearly spoken to, and acted with, and encountered, humanity. The Pope uses three words to describe the path that is to be followed: *"accompany," "discern," "integrate."* He is not laying down rules, neither strict nor flexible, which do away with individual responsibility, even in the case of very difficult circumstances. The task we have is to accompany persons in difficult circumstances, discerning what they have experienced with the intention of integrating them into the community so that no one is ever abandoned, recognizing that *"... respect also can be shown for those signs of love which in some way reflect God's own love ."* (§294)

The Family and Human Development

The Papal document, starting at the first pages of the Bible, puts the family at the crossroads of a new development of our planet. Creation and its infinite resources are entrusted to the alliance of man and woman, who are called to the fruitful partnership we know as *"family"* and that is based on the passionate and responsible love they have for each other as persons who

are able to accept and respect each other in the diversity that gives them their separate identities (“*male and female He created them*” Gen. 1:27), and in the equal dignity that they enjoy (“...*she is flesh of my flesh...*” Gen. 2:23). To their responsible and generous love, generation of new life is entrusted (“*increase and multiply,*” Gen. 1:28), together with the responsibility for the education of their children. All studies, whether of history or of contemporary life, conclude that when this partnership that is *family* is supported and appreciated, the indices of quality of life, social and economic development, transmission of values and prevention of crime and injustice, improve significantly.

Within the strategic vision that I have set out, I am convinced that the Papal document can dialogue effectively with the seventeen United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for 2015-2030. If we want a world of greater justice and peace, that grows in its care for natural resources and the environment, in initiatives for the poorer segments and populations, in peaceful coexistence and in greater solidarity, our political, religious cultural and economic institutions must work together so that the original source of relationships—the family—is recognized as such and is supported. The history of humanity, from age to age and everywhere, shows that only by beginning with this first school of relationships can we imagine and give substance to the dream that resides in the depths of our humanity—the dream that all peoples can become one family. This dream is the reason we have the United Nations, and why you devote your lives to it. With *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis has provided one more tessera for the mosaic that will realize this dream of all peoples of the earth—each with their own identity—to become one family and live in peace.