

## INTERNATIONAL PRESENTATION OF THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION

### *AMORIS LAETITIA*

**Sponsored by the Working Group of Catholic Non-Governmental Organizations at the United Nations Offices in Geneva, Switzerland, in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for the Family**

**Rome, April 19, 2016  
At the Offices of the Pontifical Council for the Family**

**Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia  
President of the Pontifical Council for the Family**

#### *The “Synodal” Nature of the Document*

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis has collected the fruits of a long ecclesial journey and has presented them authoritatively to the whole Catholic Church. During a period of two years, the Pope asked the Church, in all its manifestations, and taking a “synodal” approach, to devote full attention to the family. He began by asking his Cardinals, in the 2014 Consistory, to begin consideration of the subject. This was followed by the two Synods in 2014 and 2015, and he himself led the way by devoting almost all his weekly audience talks in 2015 to the various aspects of family life. In addition, he introduced a new procedure into the preparations for Synods by having the Synod staff ask for, collect and evaluate detailed recommendations from dioceses around the world. I don’t believe that any other papal document has ever had the benefit of such extensive preparation and input, and it is a model of the “synodal” methodology that the Pope hopes will characterize the Church’s ministry to the world.. He has written that the two Synods have gifted the Church with “*great beauty and much light...taken together, the contributions of the participants, are like a multi-faceted jewel that reflects rightful concerns as well as questions that are both honest and sincere. It was for that reason that I thought it appropriate to write a Postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation that presents the results of the two Synods but that adds other elements to guide the Church’s reflections, its dialogue and its pastoral practice while at the same time giving families courage, incentive and assistance as they live out their commitments and deal with their challenges.*” (§4)

I think it important to point out how this new process affected both the content and the methodology of the two Synods: immediately evident is the new relationship that must exist between the Church and today's families, with their "joys and burdens, tensions and rest, sufferings and deliverance, solutions and unanswered questions, annoyances and delights." (cf. §96) In these words of the Pope, it is impossible not to hear the echo of opening sentence of *Gaudium et Spes*, perhaps the best known of the documents of the Second Vatican Council: "*The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the [families] of this age, especially [hurting families] and those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.*" (cf. §1 of *Gaudium Et Spes*) There is a common thread of "joy" (*gaudium* in Latin) that links the Pope's document directly to the Council, from the initial announcement of the Council (*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*) to *Gaudium et Spes* to the Pope's 2013 Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. It is the common thread of "that immense sympathy" that Blessed Paul VI spoke of when referring to the sensitivity that characterized the work of Vatican II.

#### *Throughout the Document, Warmth and Closeness for Families*

Every page of the document reflects great warmth and sympathy for families. For example, the Pope states clearly that "*in no way can the Church fail to support the full ideal of Holy Matrimony—God's plan in all its greatness.*" (§307) I believe that the "Christian vocation" to which the Exhortation calls the family has two aspects: first, the Church cannot be hesitant as it proclaims the ideal of marriage that the Lord Himself announced when speaking of the beauty and the seriousness of the marriage bond; second, it cannot be hesitant when proclaiming marriage as a full actualization of the faith of the husband and wife. Marriage is indispensable in the life of the Church, and it is a precious resource that strengthens the faith of Christians and the Christian community.

It is the beauty and greatness of this ideal that led the Pope to ask the Church to renew its commitment to accompanying families in the concrete realities of their lives. The Church must make its own the burdens and the hopes of its believers. It is a mother. It doesn't look at families from the outside like some kind of court clerk who tracks changes and looks for faults to find. But neither is it blind, nor does it ever give up. The Church—as *Amoris Laetitia* reveals—

well knows the ills that afflict families today; but unlike prophets of doom or children of surrender, it knows that those ills are not “sicknesses unto death,” (Jn 11:4) as Jesus said of his friend Lazarus. The Church is a friend to families, and it is close to them on their path to the fullness of their commitment to Jesus.

The Exhortation, clearly reflecting Jesus’ friendship with families, is a long meditation on all the aspects of family life, those that enrich it as well as those that are threatening. It is, however, a meditation that is part of a strategic vision. His meditation on the family is not simply a meditation on individual stories of struggles and of love, important though they are. It is a meditation on the history of the world itself. The family is the mother of all relationships, and it appears as such in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis; the family and society are inseparable, so much so that if things aren’t going well in families, neither are they going well in all of society.

#### *Toward a “Family” Church*

Within his strategic vision, the Pope is asking for a change of pace and style that goes to the very shape of the Church. The Church cannot fulfill its family mission from the Lord without calling families themselves to share in that mission, and to act as the Trinitarian Lord Himself acts, that is, in a family relationship. This basic ecclesiology of the family is the very air that the Exhortation breathes; it is the horizon toward which the Church wants to lead believers in this new era. If the transformation called for in the Exhortation is welcomed with faith, it is destined to renew decisively the way in which the community of believers perceives itself. The key to this transformation is not found where some thought it to be, that is, in the dispute that marked the beginning of the recent synodal process, namely, the presumed conflict (or necessary choice) between doctrinal rigor and pastoral flexibility. Rather, urged on by the Pope’s teaching commitment, the Church is confirming its task of overcoming any artificial separation or opposition between truth and practice, between doctrine and pastoral care, in order to rediscover the depth of moral responsibility involved in the way it interprets doctrine. This responsibility, which is modeled on the way the Lord Himself acted, during his earthly ministry, leads us to discern rules in a way that takes into account the lives that the Church’s members are living, and that ensures that those persons never lose sight of the fact that they are loved by God.

The Pope knows that it is not easy to adopt the approach he calls for, but he doesn't want any misunderstanding. Sadly, 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 prosecutor who gathers evidence of transgressions without taking into account the unfortunate circumstances of life or the difficult choices we have to make. That view is one-sided and it 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 Lord wants all to be accompanied as they work toward full integration into the Body of Christ, which is His Church.

There are at least two major signs of this change of direction:

(a) Clearly, Holy Matrimony is indissoluble, but the bond between the Church and its sons and daughters is even more so, because it is like the bond that Christ has established with the Church, which is full of sinners who were loved by God even while they were still sinners. They are never abandoned, not even when they sin again. As St. Paul says, this is a great mystery, and it goes beyond any romantic metaphor of a love that is based on an idyllic but unrealistic “blue heaven.”

(b) The second sign is that the Bishop has full authority and responsibility for maintaining and protecting the bond between the Church and its members, with the knowledge that the salvation of souls is what is most important (a solemn affirmation that is repeated at the end of the Code of Canon Law). The Bishop is a judge because he also is a shepherd, and a shepherd knows his sheep even (or especially) when they go astray. His most important task is always to lead them home, where he can care for them and heal them; and he cannot do that if he leaves them where they are, abandoning them to their fate because “they brought it on themselves.”

It is clear that a new ecclesial style is being called for, and this new style calls for an understanding of the variety of situations that must be dealt with.. The Pope is not calling for new doctrine or new rules. He speaks of the contributions of the participants in the synods that

have produced a “many-faceted jewel.” (§4) He asks the individual dioceses to take responsibility for responding to the countless challenges that families are called on to face in the societies of which they are part. He notes as well that “*not every doctrinal, moral or pastoral discussion needs to be resolved by an intervention of the Magisterium.*” (§3) In the various regions of the world “*more fully inculturated solutions can be looked for, with appropriate concern for traditions and local challenges...different cultures vary greatly one from another, and every general principle...needs to be inculturated if there is to be hope that it will be observed and applied.*” (§3)

*The Family in the Word of God and in Contemporary Society and its Vocation Today.*

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 through the Bible, and we learn of their stories, which are characterized by “love and crises.” (§8)

The second describes the challenges that families today 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 presents all-consuming individualism as a poison that destroys families at their roots and 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 and multiply.

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. He invites the Church to examine its conscience: at times the Church has 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) He is more than aware, as well, of the central question today—young people avoid marriage. If young people prefer simply living together, shouldn’t we ask ourselves whether the way we present the “Gospel of the Family” is just not attractive? Shouldn’t we reexamine what we are saying and the way we are saying it?

#### *Fruitful Love and Parenthood in Holy Matrimony and the Family*

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 Pope does not limit himself (as he did in the most widely known of his 2015 catecheses) to commenting only on The Song of Songs and its fundamental lesson—which of course is a jewel of Bible revelation about the love between man and woman. He goes further. In Chapter Four, he comments in detail, word by word, on the subtle phenomenology of God-inspired love in the beautiful Pauline hymn in First Corinthians, Chapter 13. In so doing, the Pope shows how deeply and how concretely love—every love—springs from the highest love—the *agape* of God, a love that is far from being simply mystical and romantic. As Pope Francis describes it, following St. Paul step by step, love is solid, it is marked by interaction, by beauty, by sacrifice, by vulnerability and by tenacity (“*love bears all...endures all*”). God’s own love is like that, and is completely unlike the individualism that shuts love up in an obsessive “just us” situation and endangers the joy of the marital and family bond. For that reason, the Pope is completely comfortable considering that sexual intimacy between spouses as a great gift of God. We see here too that the papal document brings to fulness the suggestions contained in *Gaudium et Spes*, which he cites: “*Marriage is firstly an ‘intimate partnership of life and love’ which is a good for the spouses themselves, while sexuality is “ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman.”* (§80 of *Gaudium et Spes*) The vocabulary of family love is all about passion and fruitfulness.

In Chapter Five, the Pope turns his attention to the second dimension of marital love—fruitfulness. 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. The Pope emphasizes the necessarily social dimension of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony (§186). In it, the relationship between young and old has a special role, as does the relationship between brothers and sisters, which is a kind of training ground for the broader world of adult relationships.

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. He or she is a participant in God’s plan for passing on life. From this 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. 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, we don’t get married just for ourselves. Holy Matrimony is richer if a couple doesn’t close itself within itself. Doing that would not increase joy, it only brings sorrow. The family is the engine of history, it is the love that works for life. It is by no means a refuge for those who want to escape the challenges of life and history. In the relationship and alliance between the generations is built the entire wealth of peoples: knowledge, culture, traditions, gift and reciprocity. The passion for passing on wisdom that is the hallmark of intergenerational solidarity, and the alliance between generations, are an accurate thermometer of social progress.

Chapter Seven deals with education, and I talk about it at this point to tie it with the passing on of life that I have just discussed. The Pope notes that with respect to children *“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 significant. It is something 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)

### *Pastoral Aspects*

In the Chapter Six, the Exhortation stresses that families are evangelizers themselves, not simply recipients of evangelization. It is they above all who are called to communicate to the world the “Gospel of the Family” as an answer to the deep need for family that is written in the heart of the human person and in society itself. Clearly, families have a great need for help in that mission and in this context the Pope speaks about the responsibility of ordained ministers. He freely admits that they often “*lack the training needed to deal with the complex problems currently facing families.*” (§202) He also asks for renewed attention to the formation of seminarians. If on the one hand we must improve their psycho-affective formation and involve families more in the formation for ministry (cf. §203), on the other he maintains that “*The experience of the broad oriental tradition of a married clergy could also be drawn upon.*” (§202) Here we should begin a reflection on the relationship among families, the Church as mother in community, and the spiritual fatherhood of the ordained ministry. Today, it is clear that there is a wall separating families from the Christian community. We can say that families are more or less unchurched and that the Christian communities are often exasperatingly bureaucratic and not very family-oriented.

One other point is worthy of attention: the duty of staying close to engaged couples as they prepare for marriage. The text speaks of the importance of helping couples rediscover parish life. Faith must be joined to the life of the community. And from this follows the necessity of accompanying newlyweds along their first steps as a new family (including responsible parenthood). Here we are entering on a vast area that is almost completely unknown in day-to-day parish life. On the other hand, the experience of family movements in developing effective accompaniment programs is very useful.

The Pope also calls for accompaniment of persons who are abandoned, separated or divorced. Among other things, he emphasizes the importance of the recent reform of the procedures for recognizing the nullity of a marriage and the importance of the new responsibilities entrusted to Bishops. The document recognizes how much children suffer in situations of marital conflict and he says clearly, “*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.*” (§246) He mentions marriages with non-Catholic Christians and with non-Christians, and he speaks of families where there are persons with same-sex tendencies, emphasizing that respect is due them as persons, and that every unjust discrimination in their regard and every form of aggression or violence is wrong.

The final part of the chapter “*When death makes us feel its sting*” has great pastoral value. This aspect of life needs new pastoral attention, given the decreased understanding of mortality today and the disappearance from society of words and actions that honor the dead and comfort those who are left behind.

#### *Care for Wounded Families—Accompany, Discern, Integrate Weakness*

Chapter Eight—one of the most highly anticipated—is an invitation to mercy and to pastoral discernment in the face of situations that are not fully in conformity with what the Lord preaches. The Pope repeats that the Church must in no way cease to illuminate the truth of the faith and the heavy demands that following the Lord puts on believers—just as he did at the beginning of the document. On the other hand, the Pope asks us to look on others as Jesus does and to be aware of how God has clearly spoken, and acted, and encountered humanity. The Pope recognizes that: “*Some forms of union radically contradict this ideal, while others realize the ideal in at least a partial and analogous way.*” (§292) Still, the Church “*does not disregard the constructive elements in those situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage.*” (§292) We see here the Gospel’s concern not to “quench the smoking flax.” (Mt. 12:20) Every “seed of a family” wherever it is found, is to be accompanied and encouraged to grow.

Here we see that the new path of the pastoral life of the Church the Pope calls for is a path of mercy in a Church dedicated to accompanying and integrating everyone. No one is to be left out. What is asked for is compassion, not condemnation. This is the meaning of discernment that tries to find in diverse situations those “*signs of love that in some way reflect God’s own love.*” (§294) For this reason we are to avoid “*judgements that 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.*” (§296) Every person must find a place in the

Church and *“No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel!”* (§297) There can be many different situations and they *“should not be pigeonholed or fit into overly rigid classifications leaving no room for a suitable personal and pastoral discernment.”* (§298) For this reason, the Pope didn’t feel it necessary to promulgate *“a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases. What is possible is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases.”* (§300)

The Pope’s watchword to the Bishops in the Synods is simple and direct. Three words that make up one mission: accompany, discern, integrate into the Christian community. Our shared faith and love for our brothers and sisters can work miracles, even in the most difficult circumstances. Access to God’s grace which, once welcomed, results in the conversion of sinners, is a serious matter. The Catholic doctrine of moral judgment, somewhat neglected perhaps, is restored to a place of honor: the moral quality of a process of conversion does not necessarily coincide with the legal definition of the state of life of the sinner.

In this process of accompanying, discernment and integration, the Bishop has primary responsibility. The role of the parish priest or chaplain is to guide the sinner to where he or she becomes open to discernment by the Bishop and to reintegration into the community of believers.

In all this, it is important to realize that discernment and integration is not a do-it-yourself job. While discernment and integration is not a legal formula that gets applied automatically, neither is it an unprincipled individual choice. The path traced out in the Exhortation has clear mile markers: interpret Church doctrine, discern individual consciences, respect moral principles and safeguard communion among individuals.

Along these lines, and welcoming the observations of many Synodal Fathers, the Pope affirms that baptized persons who are divorced and civilly remarried are to be more fully integrated into the Christian communities in the various possible ways, but always avoiding scandal. *“Their participation can be expressed in different ecclesial services, which necessarily requires discerning which of the various forms of exclusion currently practiced in the liturgical, pastoral, educational and institutional framework, can be surmounted. 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 and experience her as a mother who welcomes them always, who takes care of them with affection and encourages them along the path of life and the Gospel. This integration is also needed in the care and Christian upbringing of their children, who ought to be considered most important” (§299)*

More generally, the Pope makes a statement that is very important to the understanding of the Exhortation’s orientation and meaning: *“If we consider the immense variety of concrete situations such as those I have mentioned, 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 possible 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.” (§300)* The Pope goes into great detail about what is necessary on the path of accompaniment and for the in-depth dialogue of discernment between the faithful and their pastors. In so doing, he recalls the Church’s reflection on “conditioning and attenuating circumstances” with respect to imputability and responsibility for actions; and he reflects on the relationship among the “norms of discernment,” relying on St. Thomas Aquinas who wrote that: *“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.” (§304)*

In the last section of the chapter *“The Logic of Pastoral Mercy,”* Pope Francis, in order to avoid misunderstandings, emphasizes forcefully that: *“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.” (§307)* But the overall sense of the chapter and of the spirit that the Pope intends to transmit the Church’s pastoral activity is summarized effectively in the final words of the Chapter: *“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.*" (§312) Speaking of the "logic of pastoral mercy," the Pope states firmly: "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." (n.311)

#### *Marital and Family Spirituality*

Chapter Nine is given over to marital and familial spirituality that is, "made up of thousands of small but real gestures." (§311) He states clearly 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." (§316) Everything, "moments of joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection." (§317) He speaks therefore of prayer in the light of Easter, of the spirituality of free and exclusive love where "spouses accept the challenge and aspiration of supporting one another, growing old together, and in this way reflecting God's own faithfulness." (cf. §319)

In the end, marital and family spirituality is a spirituality of "care, consolation and encouragement." In the closing paragraph of the Exhortation, the Holy Father states: "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. What we have been promised is greater than we can imagine. 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." (§325)