

PRESENTATION OF THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION

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The “Synodal” Nature of the Document

I am particularly happy to be with all of you today at this meeting of the Bishops of Nigeria, and I thank your President Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama for his invitation. Coming here, I must tell how struck I was by the fervor and passion with which the African Bishops participated in the preparations for the Synods and in the formulation of their messages. I remember in particular the volume prepared by SECAM/SCEAM, *The Future of the Family, Our Mission*, and the two regional meetings of African Bishops that I participated in: the first in Brazzaville with the bishops of ACERAC in early July 2014 and the second in Lilongwe at the end of the same month with the participation of the bishops of AMECEA. For myself as well as for the other bishops present, both gatherings were an opportunity concentrate more deeply on the themes of the Synods. In a special way I thank Pope Francis for having decided, with enthusiasm and passion, to have the world’s Bishops celebrate two Synods dedicated to the family. Together they produced the valuable, innovative and compelling document that we have in front of us.

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 February 2014 Consistory, in which Cardinal Onaiekan participated, to undertake a 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. Archbishop Kaigama, who was present at the 2014 Synod, can confirm this, as can Archbishop Ndagoso, Bishop Umoh, and Bishop Arogundade, each of whom I greet warmly. Together with Mrs. Erogunaye, they represented Nigeria in the 2015 Synod.

In the Exhortation, the Pope emphasizes that this "synodal" methodology reflected in the document was *"impressive and illuminating,"* (§4) and he continues: *"The various interventions of the Synod Fathers, to which I paid close heed, made up, as it were, a multifaceted gem reflecting many legitimate concerns and honest questions. For this reason, I thought it appropriate to prepare a post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation 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."* (§4) I think it important in my presentation to discuss 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. The Church is called to feel their *"enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures."* (§126) Reading these words, 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 *Amoris Laetitia* directly to the Council, from St. John XXIII's speech that opened 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. Knowing the importance of their mission, the Pope states clearly that "*in no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God's plan in all its grandeur.*" (§307) The Church therefore cannot be hesitant as it proclaims that ideal, following the Lord's own strong preaching about the beauty and the seriousness of the marriage bond as a full actualization of the faith of the husband and wife. Marriage is indispensable in the life of the Church, and for the life of the world. Here we touch upon a dimension that is not simply a renewal of pastoral strategy, it is much more. We are talking about a new way of "being Church" in the world. This new way is reflected in both *Amoris Laetitia* and *Evangelii Gaudium*, which are interwoven and complement each other.

It is the greatness of the ideal of marriage that led the Pope to ask the Church to renew its commitment to accompanying families in the concrete realities of their lives. The Church is a mother and 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. *Amoris Laetitia* reveals clearly the ills that afflict families today; but, unlike prophets of doom or children of surrender, the Church 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 all of them on their path to the fullness of their commitment to Jesus.

The Exhortation, clearly reflecting Jesus' passionate 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. Its 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 without acting as the Trinitarian Lord Himself acts, that is, in the communion of 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 in this time of great change.

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 confirmed in 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. There is a pastoral dimension to doctrine, but at the same time pastoral practice itself is doctrinal. The two must be lived out as a renewed perspective on the Church's very being. This responsibility, of which the Lord Himself gave us many clear examples during his earthly ministry, requires the Church (the Christian community) to discern rules in a way that takes into account the lives that the Church's members are living, so that no one ever loses sight of being loved by God.

The Gospel image that I would use to describe the "model of church" to be lived out today comes from the parable of the lost sheep (See Luke 15:4-7). But it is not just the shepherd who is to go out to find the lost sheep, all the ninety-nine are called to go out with that shepherd

to find, accompany, discern with and integrate whoever needs help. Our lives must be a constant “heading out.” The ninety-nine, if they are left alone, are excluded from the essential missionary dimension of the shepherd; and the sheepfold risks becoming no more than a self-referential bureaucracy. The Exhortation calls for a new “model of Church” that is fully missionary, always “heading out”—and producing results. That’s why—in the context of family—it’s not enough just to reorganize family pastoral activities. Much more is needed. All pastoral activity must have a family orientation, or, to put it more clearly, the whole Church must be a family.

The Pope knows that it is not easy to welcome and adopt 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 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, 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 but that is often overlooked). The Bishop is a judge because he is also 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 requires an understanding of the variety of situations that must be dealt with. The Pope is not calling for new abstract doctrine or new legal rules. In the Exhortation he recalls that while during the Synods there was a variety of contributions from the participants, that variety has produced a “many-faceted gem.” (§4) In this new perspective, theologians have an incentive to undertake a renewed consideration of the family, and individual dioceses are tasked with taking responsibility for finding answers to the countless challenges that families are called on to face in the societies of which they are part. The Pope writes that, *“Each country or region, moreover, 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.’”* (§3) He notes as well that, *“...not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium.”* (§3)

The conclusions of Section 3 just quoted lay down a challenge to every diocese, calling on them, within the common path that is Catholicism, to find concrete ways to deal with the challenges that families face. You have a delicate task in front of you. The Benin intellectual Albert Tévoédjrè writes that, “The traditional African family has a deep sense of the culture of life. Life is sacred because every life is a gift from God.” But, “the threats that weigh on today’s families in Africa are legion: degradation of behavior, attacks on the unity of marriage, the weakening of ties among family members, the increase in de facto unions, poverty, and growing unemployment that makes it difficult for parents to fulfill their responsibilities.” Is there a Nigerian, an African, answer to these crucial questions? For example, how can Section 42 of *Africae Munus*, a Section that deals with the family, be “translated” in specific and necessary ways?

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 from the Bible, and we learn of their stories, which are characterized by “love and crises.” (cf. §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”, with all the questions connected with the recognition of so-called “same-sex marriages” that are affecting your countries as well); 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. These are challenges that clearly characterize western society, but that are increasingly found here as well, particularly in cities. The document, moreover, 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. 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) Clearly—but this is a personal thought of mine—a crucial question remains unanswered: Why do young people today prefer just “living together” to marriage? Faced with this situation, 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 the Generations 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 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 Bible 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 speaks of love in terms that are in no way simply mystical and romantic. It is noteworthy that the word that appears most frequently in the Exhortation is “love,” followed by “family,” “marriage,” and “Church,”—a series that is not just accidental. It is evident that 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 God’s own love is like that!

For that reason, the Pope is completely comfortable in considering and appreciating that sexual intimacy between spouses is a great gift from God for men and women. We can say that here too the papal document brings to fullness 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 lexicon of family love, as presented by the Pope is indeed rich in passion and strong in fruitfulness.

If this fourth Chapter represents the real heart of the Exhortation, the Pope's intent is evident: to offer an education about love that is inspired by the Pauline hymn, the summit of that perfect charity that can and must inspire every family bond. This task is presented first of all to our Christian communities and their leaders, pastors and lay pastoral workers. How can we help our "loves" to be reflections and images of the one Love that is at their origin and that nurtures them? It is necessary to take a careful look with real and objective understanding at the daily life of family bonds as we find them at the beginning of the Third Millennium: the challenges, the difficulties, the obstacles that hinder the full realization of the love described by the Apostle. Let me mention one or two themes. Even if, especially in today's large cities, the role and social, familial and political standing of women has undergone profound change with the adoption of an equal rights legal structure, the basic themes of women in African society, of violence against them and oppression in general are still unresolved. All the African Bishops pointed this out in their comments on Section 30 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* that were contained in *The Future of the Family, Our Mission*. Likewise, we need to examine the role of men in patriarchal society. From a pastoral point of view, we have to question how we can help our men to be good husbands, better fathers, how can we help men to assume fully the responsibilities that come from being a father.

Another very timely question is education (dealt with in Chapter 7), and with it, love for one's children. The Cameroun philosopher Achille Mbembe, in an interview that appeared in the daily *Le Mesager* has said. "For me, the family and the educational system constitute the two most important questions we must consider. The situations in many families are no help in preparing children to improve themselves to take on the challenges of citizenship that life presents to them. Prisoners of their own way of life, shaped by local stories, by family jealousies, inheritance disputes, senseless rivalries based on ignorance and credulity...we all know people who attribute every difficulty in their life to an evil uncle's sorcery or an evil spell cast on them by a neighbor." How can we help parents find a way to educate and mature their children in a context of modernity and globalization where the challenges are so new and different compared with the closed world of only twenty years ago? Raising a child in a small Nigerian village is

certainly a challenge quite different from those found in the center of Lagos, a great metropolis. How do we respond to the formational demands that parents face when their children enter adolescence and beyond, attracted by our society which is ever more competitive, given over to personal success and open, through the Net, to stimuli and provocations unthinkable not long ago? In Africa, the Internet is at the same time both a great opportunity for development, education and growth, but at the same time it is a risk and a significant challenge.

A third area to be considered is the status of the elderly and how they are welcomed, cared for and considered in our families. Pope Francis once said, “The treatment of the elderly, like the treatment of children, is an indicator of the quality of a society. (Audience, June 16, 2014) It cannot be denied that, along with a still solid tradition of attention for the elderly we are witnessing in Africa increased violence directed at elderly persons and a concomitant increased incidence of abandonment reflecting that “throw-away” culture that Pope Francis never tires of condemning.

And we cannot forget the path of preparation for matrimony and faithful, constant accompaniment of young couples. The document insists that they must be helped to rediscover the life of the ecclesial community. Several questions that characterize your current situation can only be addressed in a communitary context that is able to produce a synthesis between traditional culture and evangelical innovation, such as: the complex relationship among traditional marriage, civil marriage and religious marriage: respect for the freedom of women in making marriage choices, a freedom that is still disregarded today and is linked to the objectively offensive practice of requiring a dowry: a real and complete education about responsible fatherhood and motherhood. African society is going through a period of profound and rapid transformation. It is not at all a closed society. Certainly we are not looking with fruitless nostalgia at the past as a time that was better than the present, a time when roles and responsibilities were perhaps more certain and better defined, but were also oppressive and frustrating because of their presumed traditional roots. African men and women, like people everywhere, are changing. And with them affective education is changing and a new equilibrium is developing between men and women. In a couple, each partner is seeking something that is

surely new and different from what a person living in a Nigerian village of forty years ago considered unique and essential.

Chapters 5 and 6 deal specifically with questions related to generation and rearing of children. They are pages that I invite you to re-read carefully because they are rich in elements that can provide answers the questions just raised. The Pope's approach emphasizes the social aspect of the family experience (§186) recognizing the individualist drift that is afflicting western society today.

Pastoral Aspects

In 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 this 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 their 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)

Next, he begins a reflection on the threefold 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 because they are often closed in on themselves and that the Christian communities are not very family-oriented because they are often exasperatingly bureaucratic.

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 handling marriage cases and the importance of the new responsibilities entrusted

to Bishops. The document speaks too of 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) You are also experiencing this situation here in Nigeria, where the divorce rate has increased significantly in recent years, thanks in part to new laws (based on a “No Fault” approach) that makes the process very easy. The Pope mentions marriages with non-Catholic Christians and with non-Christians (for you in Nigeria, this point, I believe, ties in with your experience of Islamic family law), 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. I’m thinking today of so many families destroyed by the incurable evil of AIDS. This aspect of life needs new pastoral attention, given society’s decreased appreciation of mortality 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. Just as he did at the beginning of the document, the Pope repeats that the Church must in no way cease to illuminate the truth of the faith, and the heavy demands that discipleship makes of believers. 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 [the ideal of marriage], while others realize the ideal in at least a partial and analogous way.”* (§292) In this group he includes believers who are “living together” or who are only civilly married. 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.

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 we are called on *“to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition.”* (§296) In any event, 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 are 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 continues, *“..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.”* (§300) It is necessary to encourage *“a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases”* (§300)

The message that the document gives to Bishops is simple and direct. Three words that taken together make up one mission: accompany, discern, integrate into the Christian community. It is clear that such a mission is possible on only one condition, namely that the Christian community clearly share in it. It can be said that it is the community with its pastor that is called to accompany, discern with and integrate. God does not save us one by one but rather by gathering us into a people, as the Second Vatican Council emphasizes. In that context, we all know that our shared faith and love for our brothers and sisters can work miracles, even in the most difficult circumstances.

The Catholic doctrine of moral judgment, somewhat neglected perhaps, is restored to a place of honor by the Exhortation when the Pope writes, *“it 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)

The special, but not the only, role of the parish priest or chaplain in this new approach is to accompany persons along this ecclesial path of conversion, for which the Bishop has the first responsibility; but discernment and integration is not a do-it-yourself job, not for the clergy, nor for the faithful. There is no legal formula that gets applied automatically, but neither is discernment an unprincipled individual choice, nor is it a question of exceptions to be made or privileges to be granted. It is a process traced out on a pathway of conscience tied to the “internal forum” (spiritual direction and the Sacrament of Reconciliation). The solution that is called for is a tight weave of Church doctrine, examination of consciences, respect for moral principle and the protection of communion among believers.

The Pope asks for a reflection on “*mitigating factors and situations*” (§301) with respect to imputability and responsibility for actions; and, relying on St. Thomas Aquinas, he considers the relationship among the “norms of discernment”: “*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) Seen in the normative light of moral theology, this eighth Chapter is doubtless the most demanding. The Pope, relying on traditional moral doctrine, connects with the classic theme of mitigating circumstances (§§300-303, 308) and proposes a serious reflection on the relation between norms and judgments in particular situations (discernment), without avoiding or diminishing norms, nor falling into a reductionist interpretation of moral conscience that would consider conscience a simple deductive “application” of a bloodless set of rules.

The Pope, adopting the request of the Bishops in Synod, calls for “*discernment of the ways by which the various forms of exclusion currently practiced in the liturgical, pastoral, educational and institutional framework of the Church can be surmounted.*” (§299) There are seven areas from which divorced and remarried Catholics are excluded at present: being a godparent, a lector, an extraordinary minister of the Eucharist, a religion teacher, a catechist for First Communion or Confirmation; a member of the diocesan or parish pastoral council, and a best man or maid/matron of honor at a wedding (this last is discouraged but not forbidden). The

Pope's commitment to change in this area is explicit: Divorced and civilly remarried *"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) Individual dioceses are called on to reflect upon and decide about this question.

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 of prayer as a reflection of Easter joy, and 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) and finally of marital and family spirituality as a spirituality of *"care, consolation and encouragement."* (cf. §321) 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)