

First reflections on *Amoris Laetitia*

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It is with respect, gratitude and filial disposition that the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family welcomes Pope Francis' Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, with which he has concluded the path set out by the two Synods on the Family. As Institute we have accompanied this path, offering our contribution with openness of mind and heart, with clarity and with *parrhesia*. In doing so, we were guided by the fruitful inspiration of St. John Paul II, "the Pope of the Family," an inspiration that has matured over the past 34 years of the Institute's commitment to research and teaching, always lived in close contact with the concrete experience of the pastoral care of the family.

I would like to share some reflections that derive from a first reading of Pope Francis' document. There will still be times and occasions for a more profound and detailed analysis, dedicating to the text all the attention it deserves. One can immediately see how the Holy Father's teaching is characterized by the great pastoral concern to announce the Good News of the Family in the perspective of mercy, seeking to meet the families in the concreteness of their problems and in their frailty, opening paths of conversion and of growth in love.

In the ecclesial debate and in public opinion there was one concrete question that tended to draw much interest, though from a pastoral point of view, it is certainly not the most important one: the possible admission to the Eucharist of the divorced who are living in a new civil union. In fact, as Pope Francis himself noted, this was not the central problem of the Synod. To see this, it is enough to think of the great challenges the Church faces with respect to the family today: the fact that young people increasingly tend to renounce marriage altogether; the loss of the social relevance of marriage; the new ideologies that threaten marriage; and above all the great task of bringing Christ to all the families in a new evangelization... And yet some have wanted to focus their attention on this specific point, considering it a test case for a change they much desired to see in the Church's position (a "revolution" as some called it). At the same time they sustained this change might possibly affect only the pastoral and not the doctrinal level.

A Way of Accompanying and Integrating Those Who Are Far Off

It is hence a legitimate question: does the text that has just now been published really represent a change in the traditional discipline of the Church, finally allowing the divorced and "remarried" to receive communion, at least in certain cases? After having read chapter eight, in which this question is examined, there remains only one possible conclusion: the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* does not change the Church's

discipline, a discipline that, after all, is based on doctrinal grounds, as was indicated by *Familiaris Consortio* 84 and confirmed by *Sacramentum Caritatis* 29. In fact, chapter eight does not mention the Eucharist except in a footnote. In no part of the new Post-Synodal Exhortation does Pope Francis say that the divorced and “remarried” can draw near to the Eucharist without the requirement of “living as brother and sister.” Therefore, this requirement of *Familiaris Consortio* 84 and of *Sacramentum Caritatis* 29 continues to be the fully valid point of reference for discernment. When it comes to legitimizing a change in a discipline that is rooted in Tradition and in the Church’s doctrine and that is firmly established by the Church’s Magisterium (cf. Mt 5:37), at the very minimum an unambiguous clarity would have to be expected. In fact, the way St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI have expressed themselves in *Familiaris Consortio* and in *Sacramentum Caritatis* respectively is crystal clear.

It is evident, therefore, that Pope Francis, who has insisted on the importance of the principle of synodality in the Church, did not want to go beyond the decisions of the Synods. Therefore, it must be said with clarity: also after *Amoris Laetitia* it continues to be the case that admitting to communion the divorced and “remarried,” (apart from the situations foreseen by *Familiaris Consortio* 84 and *Sacramentum Caritatis* 29) goes against the Church’s discipline. To teach that it is possible to admit the divorced and “remarried” to communion (apart from these criteria), goes against the Church’s Magisterium.

What Pope Francis’ document proposes is rather a way of integration that permits these baptized gradually to draw nearer to the Gospel way of life. In fact the objective norms do not regard subjective culpability, of which only God, who scrutinizes the heart, can be the judge. Rather they express the demands involved in every evangelizing activity and also show the goal at which evangelization aims: a fullness of life in conformity with the Gospel. The Church is called to offer this life to all, without exceptions and without casuistry. It is possible, because it is what the Gospel asks of us (n. 102). As for the negative moral norms that prohibit intrinsically evil acts, there cannot be any exceptions nor any gradualness, nor any possible discernment that could legitimate them: this is indeed the firm teaching of St. John Paul II in his Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*.

What, then, is the novelty of chapter eight? It is not the novelty of a change in doctrine or discipline. Rather it bespeaks Francis’ merciful pastoral approach, his desire to bring the Gospel to those who are far off, following a logic of progressive integration. It is for this reason that the document points out that there can be circumstances in which persons who live in objective situations of sin may possibly not be subjectively culpable on account of ignorance, fear, disordered affections or other reasons which have always been recognized by the moral tradition and which the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* mentions in n. 1735. This affirmation is important: it means that we must not judge or condemn these persons, but be merciful and patient with them, as God the Father is merciful with each of us. We need to seek for everyone the path of conversion from sin and growth in charity. Certainly *Amoris Laetitia*’s affirmation that it is impossible to define the “mortality” of personal sin without verifying the subject’s degree of responsibility, which can be attenuated or missing (n. 301), does not change the need nonetheless to speak of an objective situation of sin (as is done in n. 305).

A New Pastoral Perspective for the Church

But once casuistic and tendentious interpretations are excluded, what does the Holy Father really want to tell us with this text? Here is the decisive answer: he wants to announce the Gospel of the Family and desires to invite all, in whatever situation they may find themselves, to a path: “Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together” (n. 325). He himself had suggested this fundamental interpretative key when, interviewed on his return from the Holy Land in May 2014, he had revealed that the fundamental question that had inspired him to promote the Synods was not one of casuistry but the urgency to announce “what Jesus Christ brings to the family.” And in the document, he begins with the observation that unfortunately in our Western societies, also among many of the baptized, marriage is no longer perceived as good news. This is the true pastoral problem that the Apostolic Exhortation seeks to confront with courage. The Pope wants to open up a new way for proclaiming the good news of marriage and the family for the life of the Church.

To understand how he intends to do so, one needs to observe that he places the *Hymn of Charity* of 1 Corinthians 13 (chapter IV) at the center of his reflections. Here the Apostle Paul speaks of charity as the better way. This is how ***the Pope shows that for him love is an ever new way along which we need to proceed in full faithfulness to God’s plan for human love.*** God’s plan for human love naturally includes the fundamental dimensions that St. John Paul II’s great theology of the body – taken up by the document in nn. 150ff – had emphasized and which are illustrated and recalled also by Pope Francis: sexual difference, indissoluble and faithful unity and the openness to life in fruitfulness.

Proceeding along this way of love, we would like to underline some decisive elements that are proposed by the Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* and that are of great value for the renewal of the Church’s pastoral care.

1. There is, for one, the ***topic of education*** (chapter VII) that is truly central and that is presented from the perspective of a vocation to love. Frequently, the document speaks of “path,” “story,” “narration.” These terms express the importance of the dimension of freedom in time: the Church does not only “go out” and draw near to people, welcoming them as they are, but she also accompanies them on their way, reaching them where they are and helping them to arrive at the destination that can truly be reached. In the face of the affective analphabetism and the frailty of freedom that finds it difficult to make choices in which the whole person commits himself or herself in an irrevocable “forever,” the response can only be a renewed educational effort of the family, the Church, and social realities.

2. ***The teaching on conjugal love and on fruitfulness based on the Encyclical Humanae Vitae is re-proposed with great clarity.*** Thus the decisive task opens up of taking up again blessed Paul VI’s Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (of which we will be celebrating the 50th anniversary in 2018) as the Church’s proposal to evangelize sexual intimacy. In a culture that, beginning with the sexual revolution, has forgotten the language of the body and of sexuality (n. 222), this is a very necessary light. This truly prophetic magisterial teaching is fully confirmed also in the perspective of an integrally human ecology.

3. The document recognizes the *pastoral centrality of the family in the Church*: the family is not first of all one of the many pastoral problems to be resolved among others, but rather a living and present subject: it is the principal resource for evangelization, also in view to a more familial Church, a Church that has the profile of a “family of God.” In this way a virtuous synergy between the Church and the family is brought about. Just as the family is a “small domestic Church,” the big Church needs to have traits of and be experienced as “the family of God” (nn. 86-87).

4. The *sacramental character of Christian life* is put into relief. Christianity is based on a historical event that reaches us in the body and transforms the body of the human person. Theoretically elaborated pastoral plans will not be able to save us and even less those that seek to adapt Christian morality to the mentality of the Western world, in crisis of meaning. Therefore it is necessary to overcome any purely emotivistic approach to love or one that is trivially contractualistic. We need to recover the sense that marriage – for those who are called to it – is the vocational “hinge” of the Christian life. Weakening marriage in its constitutive demands or reducing the Eucharist to a sign of communitarian integration means losing the realism of a sacramental ontology and with that the very divine gift that sustains the life of the Church.

Leaving behind any casuistic logic, one can comprehend the great positive horizon that Pope Francis’ document opens for the Church’s mission to the families, *precisely insofar as it puts the question of education at the center, treating it as the decisive pastoral issue*. Here the Pontifical John Paul II Institute feels called upon in a very particular way on account of the mission it has received and the experience it has matured on the theological and pastoral levels.