



Amoris Laetitia

On Love in the Family

'Amoris Laetitia'

Francis challenges the church

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“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.”

Thus, Pope Francis in his new apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. (Paragraph 311.)

Here, and throughout the text, Pope Francis confronts the charge that any kind of change amounts to a capitulation to the culture, a watering down of Catholic doctrine, and turns the charge on its head. He reminds the whole Church that this great enterprise of evangelization and theology and pastoral accompaniment must flow from the root of the Christian Gospel, and not let any theological or cultural or canonical encrustations frustrate the Church from its primary mission of announcing that Gospel, most especially to the poor and the marginalized, the Gospel of Mercy.

From start to finish, Pope Francis challenges the Church to do more than simply repeat the Catechism and harangue the fallen.

Some on the left will complain that he did not “change the rules” but Pope Francis is calling for something more radical than changing from rigid, conservative rules to lax, liberal ones: That would still keep the discussion about rules, as if the Virgin Mary had given birth to a code of canon law. As he writes in the text, at Paragraph 300, “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.” Pope Francis is proposing a model of Church leadership and pastoral activ-

ity that is modeled on Jesus, who was not afraid to reach out to sinners and the lost, to engage them as people in the often fraught circumstances of their lives. Francis is calling the Church to a deeper conversion than a mere change in the rules.

In Paragraph 37, we read, “We have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life. We find it difficult to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfillment than as a lifelong burden. We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.”

Actually, I think Pope Francis told a fib there. He includes himself by saying “we” but it is clear that he has not actually “long thought” that it was enough to stress issues and issue dictats. And, the reminder that pastors are called to form, not replace, consciences is critical. As I indicated yesterday, the Holy Father does not believe the pastor, still less the magisterium, should tell people what to do, but that a pastor should accompany people so that they can discern God’s activity and calling in their own lives. The pastor encourages spiritual maturity, not memorization of a hodgepodge of canonical requirements.

In the next paragraph, we see more evidence of the large and explicit change for which Pope Francis is calling. He cites instances of happy families, and praises the extended family structures still present in more traditional, less secularized cultures. Then he writes, “Yet we have often been on the defensive, wasting pastoral energy on denouncing a decadent world without being proactive in proposing ways of finding true happiness. Many people feel that the Church’s message on marriage and the family does not clearly reflect the preaching and attitudes of Jesus, who set forth a demanding ideal yet never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery.” The words “wasting pastoral energies denouncing” leap off the page.

His first chapter is a biblical meditation on key themes related to the topic of marriage and family life, as he did in his environmental encyclical *Laudato Si’*. Now, as then, he invites us to recognize the rich variety of human experience and the common, consistent presence of God, and the need to avoid abstractions that obscure the lived reality of any people who wish to be called the People of God. “In this brief review, we can see that the word of God is not a series of abstract ideas but rather a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties or suffering,” he writes. He goes on to include a treatment of the importance of work in providing the dignity necessary to family life, again, a theme he articulated in *Laudato Si’*. I do not

know if a priest or bishop who did not have the smell of the sheep would see the importance of including this section on work, but this pope does have the smell of the sheep and has heard the stories of families burdened by a lack of employment: The socio-economic pressures families face are not unknown to him. They are certainly real in the lives of many families.

The Holy Father notes that “There are those who believe that many of today’s problems have arisen because of feminine emancipation.” He has none of it. “This argument, however, is not valid, ‘it is false, untrue, a form of male chauvinism’,” he writes. “The equal dignity of men and women makes us rejoice to see old forms of discrimination disappear, and within families there is a growing reciprocity. If certain forms of feminism have arisen which we must consider inadequate, we must nonetheless see in the women’s movement the working of the Spirit for a clearer recognition of the dignity and rights of women.”

Francis confronts “gender ideology” which seeks to deny the biological differences of the two sexes: “It is one thing to be understanding of human weakness and the complexities of life, and another to accept ideologies that attempt to sunder what are inseparable aspects of reality. Let us not fall into the sin of trying to replace the Creator. We are creatures, and not omnipotent. Creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift.” Yes, sometimes the abstractions are ideological, not canonical, and Francis is too rooted in reality to be convinced by trendy profs that the gender is a mere social or mental construct.

Pope Francis sets forth Catholic teaching, traditional teaching, beautifully and with conviction. Chapter Three is a meditation on looking to Jesus to see the role of family life in His life, and also the way the family is itself an actor in the drama of salvation. Here, and in subsequent chapters, he draws heavily on the final Relatio from the synod. This passage shows the integral relationship of our Catholic teaching on marriage and the family to the most basic Christian doctrine, the Trinity: *Scripture and Tradition give us access to a knowledge of the Trinity, which is revealed with the features of a family. The family is the image of God, who is a communion of persons. At Christ’s baptism, the Father’s voice was heard, calling Jesus his beloved Son, and in this love we can recognize the Holy Spirit (cf. Mk 1:10-11). Jesus, who reconciled all things in himself and redeemed us from sin, not only returned marriage and the family to their original form, but also raised marriage to the sacramental sign of his love for the Church (cf. Mt 19:1-12; Mk 10:1-12; Eph 5:21-32). In the human family, gathered by Christ, ‘the image and likeness’ of the Most Holy Trinity (cf. Gen 1:26) has been restored, the mystery from which all true love flows. Through the Church, marriage and the family receive the grace of the Holy Spirit from Christ, in order to bear witness to the Gospel of God’s love.*

I find this not only very beautiful, but an example of what is meant by “thinking with the Church.” When some of my non-religious friends complain about “dogma” they are reacting to the misuse

of dogma, not to the reality. Francis gives us the reality: Our lives are called to share communion with the Triune God.

It is what Francis does with dogma and the tradition of the Church that is so different from recent times. For example, at Paragraph 308, having set forth the need to always hold out the Christian ideal, he writes:

At the same time, from our awareness of the weight of mitigating circumstances – psycho-logical, historical and even biological – it follows that “without detracting from the evangelical ideal, there is a need to accompany with mer-cy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear”, making room for “the Lord’s mercy, which spurs us on to do our best.” I understand those who pre-fer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion. But I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a Church attentive to the good-ness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness, a Mother who, while clearly expressing her ob-jective teaching, “always does what good she can, even if in the process, her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street.” The Church’s pastors, in proposing to the faith-ful the full ideal of the Gos-pel and the Church’s teaching, must also help them to treat the weak with compassion, avoiding aggravation or undu-ly harsh or hasty judgements. The Gospel itself tells us not to judge or con-demn (cf. Mt 7:1; Lk 6:37). Jesus “expects us to stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune, and instead to enter into the reality of other peo-ple’s lives and to know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonder-fully complicated.”

Not only does the pope confront the charge that by opening discussion of these topics he is sow-ing “confusion,” he gently rebukes those who repeatedly stated that worry. What he wants is an adult discussion, and many thought such a discussion unnecessary because, after all, these are “irreformable” doctrines. How many times have we heard that! Pope Francis calls the Church to be both mother and teacher, with a strong emphasis on the motherhood when dealing with peo-ple whose lives do not match some abstract ideal. He sees complication as “wonderful” not as something to be shunned, because real human life is complicated. He says, in Paragraph 297, “No ‘easy recipes’ exist.” Those who favor a checklist spirituality, heavy on concerns about sexu-ality, will be disappointed by his vision. Most of the Church will, I hope, be encouraged.

This is no PR exercise. He is not simply trying to market a kinder, gentler message, although his repeated calls for tenderness are noteworthy. The fact is that those calls are noteworthy and they shouldn’t be. For too many years, the prophets of doom have thought that the best way to evi-dence their faith was to chastise others, remove themselves into a “smaller, purer” Church, and let the hurting of the world either go “all in” with a certain variety of conservative Christian theolo-gy and spirituality, or fend for themselves. Before his election, then-Cardinal Bergoglio said the

Church had become too self-referential and that this had made her sick.

In this document, as in his entire pontificate, he wants a Church in mission, on the road, getting bruised and bloodied, accompanying people in their lives, especially in those moments of difficulty and incompleteness where God's grace can be grasped especially.

Only a man of solid faith would proclaim his belief that our "wonderfully complicated" lives are no threat to the Church, but a new, sometimes bewildering, often challenging invitation to encounter the Risen Lord anew, in our midst, in our family life and in our marriages. He invites the entire Church to be converted to Christ, evermore, each day, in ways large and small. He is not changing the "rules" and he is not changing any doctrine. But, he is inviting the Church to change and not a moment too soon.