



Amoris Laetitia

On Love in the Family

Francis' exhortation a radical shift to see grace in imperfection, without fearing moral confusion

Joshua J. McElwee

Apr. 8, 2016 **NCR**

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In a radical departure from recent pastoral practice, Pope Francis has asked the world's Catholic clergy to let their lives become "wonderfully complicated" by embracing God's grace at work in the difficult and sometimes unconventional situations families and marriages face -- even at risk of obscuring doctrinal norms.

The pontiff has also called on bishops and priests globally to set aside fears of risking moral confusion, saying they must avoid a tendency to a "cold bureaucratic morality" and shift away from evaluating peoples' moral status based on rigid canonical regulations.

In a substantial and already hotly debated document addressing church teaching on family life, Francis says that Catholic bishops and priests can no longer make blanket moral determinations about so-called "irregular" situations such as divorce and remarriage.

Writing in his new apostolic exhortation, titled *Amoris Laetitia* ('The Joy of Love'), the pope strongly advocates for the worth of the traditional, life-long Christian marriage but speaks respectfully of nearly all models of family life.

He also persistently asks the church's pastors to shift away from models of teaching focused on repetition of doctrine in favor of compassion and understanding for peoples' struggles, and how God may be calling to them in the depths of their own consciences.

"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," states the pontiff at one point in the document, released by the Vatican Friday.

"It is reductive simply to consider whether or not an individual's actions correspond to a general law or rule, because that is not enough to discern and ensure full fidelity to God in the concrete life of a human being," the pope writes later.

"Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits," states Francis. "By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God."

Earlier in the document, the pope acknowledges that the way the church has expressed its family life teachings in the past has not left enough room for individuals to make appropriate decisions about their own lives.

"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," writes Francis.

"We find it difficult to present marriage more as a dynamic path to personal development and fulfillment than as a lifelong burden," he continues.

"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," he states. "We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them."

Such language, openly reevaluating how the church approaches and considers families around the world, pervades the 263-page document, which is expansive in scope.

Beginning with a moving and in-depth exegesis of both Old and New Testament passages dealing with family life, it continues on to address a wide range of issues, first evaluating struggles faced by families around the world and then suggesting pastoral responses.

Francis rarely offers outright direction for how clergy should respond to particular situations, instead giving reflections or general advice and allowing individuals to determine what may be appropriate.

The pope says the church needs to be "humble and realistic, acknowledging that at times the way we present our Christian beliefs and treat other people has helped contribute to today's problematic situation."

"We need a healthy dose of self-criticism," states the pontiff. "At times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families.

"This excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God's grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite," he continues.

"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," Francis states later.

"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," he continues.

Amoris Laetitia, hotly anticipated for months, was written by Francis as a response to two back-to-back meetings of Catholic bishops he hosted at the Vatican in 2014 and 2015 on issues of family life.

Both meetings, known as synods, made recommendations to the pontiff following the prelates' weeks of discussions. The pope's exhortation cites extensively from those recommendations, often quoting from them before then expanding into his own considerations.

The document, which unfolds over 325 numbered points and nine chapters, also quotes extensively from Francis' predecessors, the Second Vatican Council documents, local bishops' conferences, 13th century theologian and St. Thomas Aquinas, and even the late U.S. Protestant Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Pope John Paul II receives the most footnotes of any author, with more than 40 citations; Aquinas has at least twelve.

'Pastoral mercy' for divorced and remarried

Francis devotes the whole eighth chapter of the exhortation to considering how the church should act towards Catholics who divorce and remarry without first obtaining annulments, whom church practice has in the past prohibited from taking Communion.

While the pope does not specifically issue a new law or regulation allowing remarried Catholics writ-large to have the Eucharist, he significantly changes the church's stance towards such persons. Like the final document issued by the 2015 Synod, he calls for "pastoral discernment" of individual situations.

He also proposes what he calls "the logic of pastoral mercy" in working with remarried persons.

Citing John Paul II, Francis puts forward the notion of "graduality," meaning that Catholics may sometimes grow toward adherence or understanding of church teaching throughout their lives.

"This is not a 'gradualness of law' but rather a gradualness in the prudential exercise of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law," states the pope. "For the law is itself a gift of God which points out the way, a gift for everyone without exception."

"No one can be condemned forever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel!" he exhorts.

"Here I am not speaking only of the divorced and remarried, but of everyone, in whatever situation they find themselves."

Francis then distinguishes between remarried persons who have been in their new relationships for lengthy periods of time and those who have only recently moved on from a prior divorce.

"The divorced who have entered a new union, for example, can find themselves in a variety of situations, which should not be pigeonholed or fit into overly rigid classifications leaving no room

for a suitable personal and pastoral discernment," he states.

In reference to the different situations remarried people can be in, Francis writes about "mitigating factors" that clergy should consider in their pastoral discernment in working with remarried persons.

"The Church possesses a solid body of reflection concerning mitigating factors and situations," he states. "Hence it is 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."

Quoting first from Aquinas and then the formal *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Francis states: "A negative judgment about an objective situation does not imply a judgment about the imputability or culpability of the person involved."

In other words, the pope says one cannot judge a person based on how their situations measure up to any general norm.

He then affirms the 2015 synod document's call that "pastoral discernment, while taking into account a person's properly formed conscience, must take responsibility for these situations."

Later, the pope expounds on Catholic teaching on conscience, saying that "individual conscience needs to be better incorporated into the Church's praxis in certain situations which do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage."

"Conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel," writes Francis.

"It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal," he states.

"Let us recall that this discernment is dynamic," writes the pope. "It must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized."

Quoting again from Aquinas, Francis says he wants to "earnestly ask that we always recall" one of his teachings in the *Summa Theologiae*.

"Although there is necessity in the general principles, the more we descend to matters of detail, the more frequently we encounter defects," the pope quotes the saint.

Francis then puts it more bluntly: "A pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in 'irregular' situations, as if they were stones to throw at people's lives."

"This would bespeak the closed heart of one used to hiding behind the Church's teachings, 'sitting on the chair of Moses and judging at times with superiority and superficiality difficult cases and wounded families,'" he continues.

Proposing his "logic of pastoral mercy," the pontiff says that while "in no way must the Church de-

sist from proposing the full ideal of marriage" there is also "a need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear."

"I understand those who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion," Francis states.

"But I sincerely believe that Jesus wants a Church attentive to the goodness which the Holy Spirit sows in the midst of human weakness, a Mother who, while clearly expressing her objective teaching, 'always does what good she can, even if in the process, her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street,'" he continues.

"At times we find it hard to make room for God's unconditional love in our pastoral activity," writes the pope.

"We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance," he states. "That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel. It is true, for example, that mercy does not exclude justice and truth, but first and foremost we have to say that mercy is the fullness of justice and the most radiant manifestation of God's truth."

Same-sex marriage, contraception, gender ideology

Francis addresses several other sometimes controversial issues throughout the exhortation, including same-sex marriage, contraception and abortion.

While the pontiff recognizes values he says are expressed in committed same-sex relationships, he clearly separates them from heterosexual relationships. He also firmly affirms Pope Paul VI's teaching against use of contraception by Catholics and speaks strongly against abortion.

"We need to acknowledge the great variety of family situations that can offer a certain stability, but de facto or same-sex unions, for example, may not simply be equated with marriage," writes the pope. "No union that is temporary or closed to the transmission of life can ensure the future of society."

Quoting the 2015 synod document later, he states: "As for proposals to place unions between homosexual persons on the same level as marriage, there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family."

On contraception, Francis states: "From the outset, love refuses every impulse to close in on itself; it is open to a fruitfulness that draws it beyond itself. Hence no genital act of husband and wife can refuse this meaning, even when for various reasons it may not always in fact beget a new life."

Yet, later in the document, the pope also affirms and repeats a passage from the 2015 synod document that put the choice to use contraception in the realm of decisions informed by one's conscience.

"Decisions involving responsible parenthood presuppose the formation of conscience, which is 'the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. There each one is alone with God, whose voice echoes in the depths of the heart,'" he writes.

On abortion, Francis states: "So great is the value of a human life, and so inalienable the right to life of an innocent child growing in the mother's womb, that no alleged right to one's own body can justify a decision to terminate that life, which is an end in itself and which can never be considered the 'property' of another human being."

But the pontiff speaks strongly against violence or oppression towards women, stating: "I would like to stress the fact that, even though significant advances have been made in the recognition of women's rights and their participation in public life, in some countries much remains to be done to promote these rights."

"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," the pope states.

"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," he continues.

Francis also speaks clearly against the teaching of what he calls "gender ideology," saying: "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."

But later he also seems to acknowledge that gender exists on something of a spectrum.

"It is true that we cannot separate the masculine and the feminine from God's work of creation, which is prior to all our decisions and experiences, and where biological elements exist which are impossible to ignore," states the pontiff. "But it is also true that masculinity and femininity are not rigid categories."

'May we never lose heart'

Francis devotes the fourth chapter of the exhortation to a moving and in-depth word-by-word consideration of St. Paul's famous and often quoted description of love as patient, kind, and bearing and believing all things.

Examining each of the saint's original Greek words, the pontiff puts them into their linguistic and cultural context to better explain the Christian view of love. The reflection reads like a careful, kind back-to-the-basics explanation of how Christians should act.

On Paul's description that love "bears all things," for example, the pontiff states: "Married couples joined by love speak well of each other; they try to show their spouse's good side, not their weakness and faults." For "believes all things," he states: "Love trusts, it sets free, it does not try to control, possess and dominate everything."

Later in the chapter, Francis then speaks directly to people considering or just beginning marriage, offering kind and straightforward advice about life-long partnership.

The pope calls on partners to practice dialogue with one another, saying: "Men and women, young people and adults, communicate differently. They speak different languages and they act in different ways."

"Take time, quality time," the pontiff suggests. "This means being ready to listen patiently and attentively to everything the other person wants to say. It requires the self-discipline of not speaking until the time is right."

"Develop the habit of giving real importance to the other person," he advises later. "This means appreciating them and recognizing their right to exist, to think as they do and to be happy. Never downplay what they say or think, even if you need to express your own point of view."

"Keep an open mind," says Francis. "Don't get bogged down in your own limited ideas and opinions, but be prepared to change or expand them. The combination of two different ways of thinking can lead to a synthesis that enriches both."

The pope concludes the document with a chapter on the spirituality of marriage, citing the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on spirituality born in family life.

"Just as God dwells in the praises of his people, so he dwells deep within the marital love that gives him glory," states Francis.

"The Lord's presence dwells in real and concrete families, with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes," the pope continues.

"The spirituality of family love is made up of thousands of small but real gestures," he states. "In that variety of gifts and encounters which deepen communion, God has his dwelling place."

"Life as a couple is a daily sharing in God's creative work, and each person is for the other a constant challenge from the Holy Spirit," Francis states. "The two are thus mutual reflections of that divine love which comforts with a word, a look, a helping hand, a caress, an embrace."

"All of us are called to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families, and every family must feel this constant impulse," the pontiff concludes. "Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together."

"What we have been promised is greater than we can imagine," he states. "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."