



CNI

FAITH FOCUS - Pope Francis' Exhortation 'Amoris Laetitia'

An Overview, Five short key passages, Pope Francis' Prayer to the Holy Family, availability from Veritas and Introduction from the Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Armagh

An Overview

Amoris Laetitia runs to 261 pages and is divided into nine chapters as follows:

Chapter 1 – In The Light The Word

Chapter 2 – The Experiences And Challenges Of Families

Chapter 3 – Looking To Jesus: The Vocation Of The Family

Chapter 4 – Love In Marriage

Chapter 5 – Love Made Fruitful

Chapter 6 – Some Pastoral Perspectives

Chapter 7 – Towards A Better Education Of Children

Chapter 8 – Accompanying, Discerning And Integrating Weakness

Chapter 9 – The Spirituality Of Marriage And The Family

Five short key passages

The full 60,000-word text of *Amoris Laetitia* is available [here](#). But these are five key moments likely to attract attention:

1. A footnote on Communion

On the much-discussed question of Communion for the remarried, the exhortation says nothing direct. Instead, it makes a general statement about those in “irregular” situations (305):

“Because of forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, it is possible that in an objective situation of sin – which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such – a person can be living in God’s grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church’s help to this end.”

A footnote (f351) adds:

“In certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments. Hence, ‘I want to remind priests

that the confessional must not be a torture chamber, but rather an encounter with the Lord's mercy' (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* [24 November 2013], 44: AAS 105 [2013], 1038). I would also point out that the Eucharist 'is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.'"

2. Diminished responsibility

The document addresses the question of how external circumstances may reduce culpability for sin (301). This bears on the question of pastoral discernment in "irregular situations".

"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. More is involved here than mere ignorance of the rule. A subject may know full well the rule, yet have great difficulty in understanding 'its inherent values', or be in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to act differently and decide otherwise without further sin. As the Synod Fathers put it, 'factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision'".

"The Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly mentions these factors: 'imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence,

duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors’.”

3. The authority of the document

The document does not deal in depth with the question of authority, but it does not claim to make authoritative doctrinal statements. It presents itself as a summing-up of the recent Synods, with some “considerations”. As an apostolic exhortation, it has a lower level of authority than an encyclical; the Pope’s encyclical *Laudato Si’* claimed that it was “now added to the body of the Church’s social teaching”.

“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)

4. Reaffirmation of teaching on contraception

As well as condemning abortion, the document contains many references to Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* and John Paul II's writings on contraception (68, 81 82, 151, 155, 283) Perhaps the strongest restatement of Church teaching is this (80):

“Nonetheless, the conjugal union is ordered to procreation ‘by its very nature’. The child who is born ‘does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfilment’.

“He or she does not appear at the end of a process, but is present from the beginning of love as an essential feature, one that cannot be denied without disfiguring that love itself. 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.”

5. On same-sex unions

The exhortation briefly summarises the conclusions of the synod, which strongly opposed the redefinition of marriage (250) and repeats the Church's teaching on showing consideration to gay people (251):

“During the Synod, we discussed the situation of families whose members include persons who experience same-sex attraction, a situation not easy either for parents or for children. We would like before all else to reaffirm that every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while ‘every sign of unjust discrimination’ is to be carefully avoided, particularly any form of aggression and violence.

“Such families should be given respectful pastoral guidance, so that those who manifest a homosexual orientation can receive the assistance they need to understand and fully carry out God’s will in their lives.”

Pope Francis’ Prayer to the Holy Family

(which he shares at the end of Amoris Laetitia)

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
in you we contemplate
the splendour of true love;
to you we turn with trust.
Holy Family of Nazareth,
grant that our families too
may be places of communion and prayer,
authentic schools of the Gospel
and small domestic churches.
Holy Family of Nazareth,

may families never again experience violence, rejection and division; may all who have been hurt or scandalized find ready comfort and healing. Holy Family of Nazareth, make us once more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family, and its beauty in God's plan. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, graciously hear our prayer.

Available from Veritas

Veritas, the publishing agency of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, and a leading religious publisher in Ireland, will publish Pope Francis' new Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia, The Joy of Love: On Love in the Family*.

The Apostolic Exhortation is expected to be available from all nine Veritas stores and on www.veritas.ie from 18 April next. Recent publications from Pope Francis continue to be in great demand by customers of Veritas. In 2013 Veritas published Pope Francis' first Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)*, which to date has sold over 23,000 copies. In 2015 Veritas published Pope Francis's encyclical letter on care for our common home

Laudato Si' (*Praise Be To You*), which has sold over 15,000 copies in Ireland .

Introduction from the Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Armagh welcoming Pope Francis' Exhortation 'Amoris Laetitia'

“I think that this is the first time that I have ever set out to present a document of the Pope by doing precisely what Pope Francis said that I should not do. Pope Francis in his introduction to *Amoris Laetitia* states: “I do not recommend a rushed reading of the text”. I began reading the text yesterday after lunch and I tried to read all 256 loose pages in one go.

All I can say is that it will be very difficult for media to do justice to such a lengthy and complex document in one sweep. It is a document which addresses an extraordinary varied scenario. It includes reflections on the current situation of families in different cultures and different parts of the world. It is a document with reflections on the teaching of Jesus Christ on marriage and family life. It looks at the Church's teaching. It looks – in perhaps the most central yet fascinating yet complex chapter – on the nature of marital love. It deals with how the

Church must provide pastoral accompaniment and support for families. It looks at how the Church should address certain difficult situations which married couples have to face and it looks at a spirituality of marriage and the family.

Amoris Laetitia is an encyclopaedic document and like all encyclopaedic documents much of its most valuable content runs the risk of being bypassed by a preoccupation with one or two of its aspects.

All of this is situated within a process which began in 2014 when Pope Francis asked bishops around the world to consult with their own priests and lay men and women on the situation of the family today. That process continued with the celebration of two sessions of the Synod of Bishops. Each of these Synods produced its own Report which was published at the time. These Reports constitute the backbone of the Pope's document. But the document is also full of very personal reflections of Pope Francis. *Amoris Laetitia* reflects faithfully the thoughts of the Synod and it is yet completely infused with the original pastoral style of Pope Francis.

There is no way in which it would be possible to present this afternoon a swift summary of this

document. To understand it we have first of all to identify and understand that basic pastoral style of Pope Francis not just in this document, but in his entire pontificate.

Some will be disappointed as they will say that the Pope did not seem to change doctrine and others will say that it was clear from the outset that the Pope cannot change doctrine. The first mistake would be for one or other of the polemicists to cry victory. Pope Francis realises that we do not live in a world where everything is simply black and white, where all that is needed is either to repeat doctrinal formulations or to set these doctrines aside and be “pastoral”

Pope Francis does not set out to change doctrine. He recognises, however, the difficulties we have in understanding the teaching of Jesus in our current cultures. He says that: “at times we have proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete and practical possibilities of real families” He admits that: “We find it difficult to present marriage as a more dynamic path to personal development and fulfilment rather than as a lifelong burden. We also find it hard to make room for the

consciences of the faithful... We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them”

He notes that “many people feel that the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family does not reflect clearly 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 document tries to do both: to set out clearly the beautiful yet demanding teaching of Jesus and to teach that to men and women whose lives are lived within their own human frailties and failures.

One of the problems is that we too live in a world where we judge things in black and white. We would like the Pope to say a simple yes or no on subjects which are much more complex than we wish to admit. The secular world can be just as black and white in seeking answers as are the fundamentalists on the right or the left within the Church.

Where can we find a starting point in understanding Pope Francis position? My starting point is in the first interview which Pope Francis gave shortly after his election, when he was asked by the interviewer: “who exactly is Jorge Mario Bergoglio”. The Pope’s instant answer was: “I am a sinner”. Then he paused and said: “Let me reflect on that”. “No”, he said, “that is correct, I am a sinner”.

This is the key to understanding many of Pope’s Francis’s phrases. A Pope who considers himself in the first place a sinner will never be arrogant and harsh in his judgement of other sinners. A sinner who has experienced God’s mercy in the face of his own sinfulness will appreciate how that mercy – and not condemnation – is the path which can help others to reach the fullness of God’s teaching. Pope Francis, in another text, has said that Christian morality is not “a never falling down”, but “an always getting up again, thanks to this hand which catches us”.

In the document Pope Francis takes up an earlier comment stressing that: “The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone for eternity, but to pour out the balm of God’s mercy on all those who ask

for it with sincere heart. The way of the Church is precisely to leave her four walls behind and go out in search of those who are distant, those essentially on the outskirts of life”.

Pope Francis’ position is that of a theology which recognises human failure but is also capable of leading us forwards on the path to fulfilling the commandment of love. It is when we recognise our own human limitations that we understand the other and not rush to judgement. The Pope says “We have to realise that all of us are a complex mixture of light and shadows and [that] love coexists with imperfection”. The secret of married love lies not in me getting what I want, but in me realising my own limitations and not being judgemental of the other.

He criticises a culture of revenge and retaliation within marriage in a lengthy quote from Martin Luther King which, by the way, could well be applied to those in our society who feel that violence is a sign of strength. “Somewhere somebody must have a little sense and that is the strong person. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil”.

Much of the document addresses how married love can grow despite human weakness. "Love is destroyed by the culture of the ephemeral which prevents a constant process of growth... A love that fails to grow is at risk. Often a spouse does not need a solution to his or her problems, but simply to be heard, to feel that someone has acknowledged their pain, their fear their anger, their hopes and dreams"

He addresses the theme of sexuality not in a condemnatory tone but neither in a libertarian context: "Sexuality is not means of gratification or entertainment; it is an interpersonal language wherein the other is taken in his or her sacred and inviolable dignity".

The document addresses at length what is required for a real renewal of pastoral care within the Church. He stresses the role of the parish as being the primary place where that renewal should take place. This is perhaps the biggest practical challenge that we face in the Irish Church. The parish cannot simply outsource to agencies the task of marriage preparation and that of accompanying couples along the path of their lives.

A leading role in this parish based-renewal must be taken by families themselves. That is something which springs from the nature of the Sacrament of Marriage. He notes that in the replies given in the worldwide consultation it became clear that ordained ministers often lack the training needed to deal with the complex problems currently facing families and that the experience of the broad oriental tradition of married clergy could also be drawn upon. He stresses that “the presence of lay people, families and especially women in priestly formation promotes an appreciation of the diversity and complementarity of the different vocation in the Church.

Amoris Laetitia is an encyclopaedic document which contains an extraordinary wealth of pastoral advice. Its spirit and content cannot be appreciated in a rushed single reading. Its reflections on education, on ageing, on the ethical education of children, on death and widowhood, on the erotic dimension of love on homelessness, unemployment and migrants are simple and moving, quite original and at times strong.

But it is not just a collection of separated chapters. There is a unifying thread: the Gospel of the family is challenging and demanding, but which, with the grace of God and his mercy, is attainable and fulfilling, enriching and worthwhile. Like the document itself, the path to realising the commandment of love in married life will not be attained through a rushed reading of the realities of each individual life, but through an enriching path marked often by failure: not “a never falling down”, but “an always getting up again, thanks to this hand which catches us”.

GET CNI HEADLINES EACH DAY

Facebook and Twitter

Click on logo at CNI Home page

www.churchnewsireland.org

+ Please share CNI with your friends

www.churchnewsireland.org