



Pastoral for Family

“The Christian proclamation on the family is good news indeed”
AL 1

In the light of the Word

Amoris Lætitia - Chapter I

POST SYNODAL APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION AMORIS LÆTITIA OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS ON LOVE IN THE FAMILY

With this article we begin the presentation of the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Lætitia*, by Pope Francis, dated March 19, 2016, as a resource for study, reflection and deepening of the Church's thinking about the family and to encourage everyone to be signs of the mercy and closeness of God in our own family and in the accompaniment of other families.



INTRODUCTION

The joy of love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church. As the Synod Fathers noted, for all the many signs of crisis in the institution of marriage, “the desire to marry and form a family remains vibrant, especially among young people, and this is an inspiration to the Church”¹. As a response to that desire, “the Christian proclamation on the family is good news indeed” (Cf. AL 1).

Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. Jn 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. 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”² (Cf. AL 3).

I must also say that the Synod process proved both impressive and illuminating. 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 (Cf. AL 4).

This Exhortation is especially timely in this Jubilee Year of Mercy; first, because it represents an invitation to Christian families to value the gifts of marriage and the family and to persevere in a love strengthened by the virtues of generosity, commitment, fidelity and patience. Second, because it seeks to encourage everyone to be a sign of mercy and closeness wherever family life remains imperfect or lacks peace and joy. It is my hope that, in reading this text, all will feel called to love and cherish family life, for “families are not a problem; they are first and foremost an opportunity” (Cf. AL 7).

¹ III Asamblea General Extraordinaria del Sínodo de los Obispos, *Relatio synodi* (18 octubre 2014), 2

² Discurso en la clausura de la XIV Asamblea General Ordinaria del Sínodo de los Obispos (24 octubre 2015)

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Chapter I

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The Bible is full of families, births, love stories and family crises. This is true from its very first page, with the appearance of Adam and Eve's family with all its burden of violence but also its enduring strength (cf. Gen 4) to its very last page, where we behold the wedding feast of the Bride and the Lamb (Rev 21:2, 9). Jesus' description of the two houses, one built on rock and the other on sand (cf. Mt 7:24-27), symbolizes any number of family situations shaped by the exercise of their members' freedom, for, as the poet says, "every home is a lampstand" (Cf. AL 8).

A. YOU AND YOUR SPOUSE



Let us cross the threshold of this tranquil home, with its family sitting around the festive table. At the centre we see the father and mother, a couple with their personal story of love. They embody the primordial divine plan clearly spoken of by Christ himself: "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female?" (Mt 19:4). We hear an echo of the command found in the Book of Genesis: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24) (AL 9).

The majestic early chapters of Genesis present the human couple in its deepest reality. Those first pages of the Bible make a number of very clear statements. The first, which Jesus paraphrases, says that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (1:27). It is striking that the "image of God" here refers to the couple, "male and female". God's transcendence is preserved, yet inasmuch as he is also the Creator; the fruitfulness of the human couple is a living and effective "image", a visible sign of his creative act (Cf. AL 10).

The couple that loves and begets life is a true, living icon – not an idol like those of stone or gold prohibited by the Decalogue – capable of revealing God the Creator and Saviour. For this reason, fruitful love becomes a symbol of God's inner life (Cf. Gen 1:28; 9:7; 17:2-5, 16; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3-4). The ability of human couples to beget life is the path along which the history of salvation progresses. Seen this way, the couple's fruitful relationship becomes an image for understanding and describing the mystery of God himself, for in the Christian vision of the Trinity, God is contemplated as Father, Son and Spirit of love. The triune God is a communion of love, and the family is its living reflection. The Apostle Paul relates the couple to the "mystery" of the union of Christ and the Church (Cf. Eph 5:21-33) (Cf. AL 11).

In speaking of marriage, Jesus refers us to yet another page of Genesis, which, in its second chapter, paints a splendid and detailed portrait of the couple.

First, we see the man, who anxiously seeks “a helper fit for him” (vv. 18, 20), capable of alleviating the solitude which he feels amid the animals and the world around him. The original Hebrew suggests a direct encounter, face to face, eye to eye, in a kind of silent dialogue, for where love is concerned, silence is always more eloquent than words. It is an encounter with a face, a “thou”, who reflects God’s own love and is man’s “best possession, a helper fit for him and a pillar of support”, in the words of the biblical sage (Sir 36:24). Or again, as the woman of the Song of Solomon will sing in a magnificent profession of love and mutual self-bestowal: “My beloved is mine and I am his... I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (2:16; 6:3) (AL 12).

This encounter, which relieves man’s solitude, gives rise to new birth and to the family. Significantly, Adam, who is also the man of every time and place, together with his wife, starts a new family. Jesus speaks of this by quoting the passage from Genesis: “The man shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one” (Mt 19:5; cf. Gen 2:24). The very word “to be joined” or “to cleave”, in the original Hebrew, bespeaks a profound harmony, a closeness both physical and interior, to such an extent that the word is used to describe our union with God: “My soul clings to you” (Ps 63:8). The marital union is thus evoked not only in its sexual and corporal dimension, but also in its voluntary self-giving in love. The result of this union is that the two “become one flesh”, both physically and in the union of their hearts and lives, and, eventually, in a child, who will share not only genetically but also spiritually in the “flesh” of both parents (AL 13).

B. YOUR CHILDREN ARE AS THE SHOOTS OF AN OLIVE TREE

Let us once more take up the song of the Psalmist. In the home where husband and wife are seated at table, children appear at their side “like olive shoots” (Ps 128:3), that is, full of energy and vitality. If the parents are in some sense the foundations of the home, the children are like the “living stones” of the family (cf. 1 Pet 2:5). Significantly, the word which appears most frequently in the Old Testament after the name of God (YHWH, “the Lord”), is “child” (ben, “son”), which is itself related to the verb “to build” (banah). Hence, Psalm 128, in speaking of the gift of children, uses imagery drawn from the building of a house and the social life of cities: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain... Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb, a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one’s youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate” (Ps 127:1, 3-5). These images reflect the culture of an ancient society, yet the presence of children is a sign of the continuity of the family throughout salvation history, from generation to generation (Cf. AL 14).



Here too, we can see another aspect of the family. We know that the New Testament speaks of “churches that meet in homes” (Cf. 1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:5; Col 4:15; Philemon 2). A family’s living space could turn into a domestic church, a setting for the Eucharist, the presence of Christ seated at its table. We can never forget the image found in the Book of Revelation, where the Lord says: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev 3:20). Here we see a home filled with the presence of God, common prayer and every blessing. This is the meaning of the conclusion of Psalm 128, which we cited above: “The Lord bless you from Zion!” (Ps 128:4-5) (Cf. AL 15).

The Bible also presents the family as the place where children are brought up in the faith. This is evident from the description of the Passover celebration (Cf. Ex 12:26-27; Deut 6:20-25) and it later appears explicitly in the Jewish haggadah, the dialogue accompanying the rite of the Passover meal. One of the Psalms celebrates the proclamation of faith within families: “All that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us, we will not hide from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders which he has wrought. He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children; that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children” (Ps 78:3-6). The family is thus the place where parents become

their children's first teachers in the faith. They learn this "trade", passing it down from one person to another: "When in time to come your son asks you... You shall say to him..." (Ex 13:14). Thus succeeding generations can raise their song to the Lord: "young men and maidens together, old and young together!" (Ps 148:12) (AL 16).

Parents have a serious responsibility for this work of education, as the Biblical sages often remind us (cf. Prov. 3:11-12; 6:20-22; 13:1; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:17). Children, for their part, are called to accept and practice the commandment: "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex 20:12). Here the verb "to honor" has to do with the fulfillment of family and social commitments; these are not to be disregarded under the pretense of religious motives (cf. Mk 7:11-13). "Whoever honors his father atones for sins, and whoever glorifies his mother is like one who lays up treasure" (Sir 3:3-4) (AL 17).

The Gospel goes on to remind us that children are not the property of a family, but have their own lives to lead. If it is true that Jesus is a model of obedience to his earthly parents, placing himself under their charge (Cf. Lk 2:51), also it is certain that he also shows that children's life decisions and their Christian vocation may demand a parting for the sake of the Kingdom of God (Cf. Mt 10:34-37; Lk 9:59-62). Jesus himself, at twelve years of age, tells Mary and Joseph that he has a greater mission to accomplish apart from his earthly family (Cf. Lk 2:48-50). In this way, he shows the need for other, deeper bonds even within the family: "My mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Lk 8:21). All the same, in the concern he shows for children – whom the societies of the ancient Near East viewed as subjects without particular rights and even as family property – Jesus goes so far as to present them as teachers, on account of their simple trust and spontaneity towards others. "Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:3-4) (AL 18).

C. A PATH OF SUFFERING AND BLOOD



The idyllic picture presented in Psalm 128 is not at odds with a bitter truth found throughout sacred Scripture, that is, the presence of pain, evil and violence that break up families and their communion of life and love. For good reason Christ's teaching on marriage (Cf. Mt 19:3-9) is inserted within a dispute about divorce. The Word of God constantly testifies to that sombre dimension already present at the beginning, when, through sin, the relationship of love and purity between man and woman turns into domination: "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen 3:16) (AL 19).

This thread of suffering and bloodshed runs through numerous pages of the Bible, beginning with Cain's murder of his brother Abel. And the various between the sons and the wives of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the tragedies and violence marking the family of David, the family problems reflected in the story of Tobias and the bitter complaint of Job: "He has put my brethren far from me... my kinsfolk and my close friends have failed me... I am repulsive to my wife, loathsome to the sons of my own mother" (Job 19:13-14, 17) (AL 20).

Jesus himself was born into a modest family that soon had to flee to a foreign land. He visits the home of Peter, whose mother-in-law is ill (cf. Mk 1:30-31) and shows sympathy upon hearing of deaths in the homes of Jairus and Lazarus (Cf. Mk 5:22-24, 35-43; Jn 11:1-44). He hears the desperate wailing of the widow of Nain for her dead son (Cf. Lk 7:11-15) and heeds the plea of the father of an epileptic child in a small country town (Cf. Mk 9:17-27). He goes to the homes of tax collectors like Matthew and Zacchaeus (Cf. Mt 9:9-13; Lk 19:1-10), and speaks to sinners like the woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Cf. Lk 7:36-50). Jesus knows the anxieties and tensions experienced by families and he weaves them into his parables: children who leave home to seek adventure (Cf. Lk 15:11-32), or who prove troublesome (Mt 21:28-31) or fall prey to violence (Mk 12:1-9). He is also sensitive to the embarrassment caused by the lack of wine at a wedding feast (Jn 2:1-10), the failure of guests to come to a banquet (Mt 22:1-10), and the anxiety of a poor family over the loss of a coin (Lk 15:8-10) (AL 21).

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. For it shows them the goal of their journey, when God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more” (Rev 21:4) (AL 22).

D. THE WORK OF YOUR HANDS

At the beginning of Psalm 128, the father appears as a laborer who by the work of his hands sustains the physical well-being and tranquility of his family: “You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you” (Ps 128:2). That work is an essential part of human dignity; there we read that “the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). Man is presented as a labourer who works the earth, harnesses the forces of nature and produces “the bread of anxious toil” (Ps 127:2), in addition to cultivating his own gifts and talents (AL 23).



Labor also makes possible the development of society and provides for the sustenance, stability and fruitfulness of one’s family: “May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! May you see your children’s children!” (Ps. 128:5-6). The Book of Proverbs also presents the labor of mothers within the family; their daily work is described in detail as winning the praise of their husbands and children (cf. 31:10-31). The Apostle Paul was proud not to live as a burden to others, since he worked with his own hands and assured his own livelihood (Cf. Acts 18:3; 1 Cor. 4:12; 9:12). Paul was so convinced of the necessity of work that he laid down a strict rule for his communities: “If anyone will not work, let him not eat” (2 Th. 3:10; Cf. 1 Th. 4:11) (AL 24).

The suffering created by unemployment and the lack of steady work, as reflected in the Book of Ruth, Jesus’ own parable of the laborers forced to stand idly in the town square (Mt 20:1-16), and his personal experience of meeting people suffering from poverty and hunger. Sadly, these realities are present in many countries today, where the lack of employment opportunities takes its toll on the serenity of family life (AL 25).

Nor can we overlook the social degeneration brought about by sin, as, for example, when human beings tyrannize nature, selfishly and even brutally ravaging it. This leads to the desertification of the earth (Cf. Gen 3:17-19) and those social and economic imbalances denounced by the prophets, beginning with Elijah (Cf. 1 Kg 21) and culminating in Jesus’ own words against injustice (Cf. Lk 12:13; 16:1-31) (AL 26).

E. THE TENDERNESS OF AN EMBRACE



Christ proposed as the distinctive sign of his disciples the law of love and the gift of self for others (cf. Mt 22:39; Jn 13:34). He did so in stating a principle that fathers and mothers tend to embody in their own lives: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). Love also bears fruit in mercy and forgiveness. We see this in a particular way in the scene of the woman caught in adultery; in front of the Temple, the woman is surrounded by her accusers, but later, alone with Jesus, she meets not condemnation but the admonition to lead a more worthy life (Cf. Jn 8:1-11) (AL 27).

Against this backdrop of love so central to the Christian experience of marriage and the family, another virtue stands out, one often overlooked in our world of frenetic and superficial relationships. It is tenderness. Let us consider the moving words of Psalm 131. As in other biblical texts (e.g., Ex 4:22; Is 49:15; Ps 27:10), the union between the Lord and his faithful ones is expressed in terms of parental love. Here we see a delicate and tender

intimacy between mother and child: the image is that of a babe sleeping in his mother's arms after being nursed. As the Hebrew word *gamûl* suggests, the infant is now fed and clings to his mother, who takes him to her bosom.

There is a closeness that is conscious and not simply biological. Drawing on this image, the Psalmist sings: "I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child quieted at its mother's breast" (Ps 131:2). We can also think of the touching words that the prophet Hosea puts on God's lips: "When Israel was a child, I loved him... I took them up in my arms... I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them" (Hos 11:1, 3-4) (Cf. AL 28).

With a gaze of faith and love, grace and fidelity, we have contemplated the relationship between human families and the divine Trinity. The word of God tells us that the family is entrusted to a man, a woman and their children, so that they may become a communion of persons in the image of the union of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Begetting and raising children, for its part, mirrors God's creative work. The family is called to join in daily prayer, to read the word of God and to share in Eucharistic communion, and thus to grow in love and become ever more fully a temple in which the Spirit dwells (AL 29).

Every family should look to the icon of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Its daily life had its share of burdens and even nightmares, as when they met with Herod's implacable violence. This last was an experience that, sad to say, continues to afflict the many refugee families who in our day feel rejected and helpless. Like the Magi, our families are invited to contemplate the Child and his Mother, to bow down and worship him (cf. Mt 2:11). Like Mary, they are asked to face their family's challenges with courage and serenity, in good times and bad, and to keep in their heart the great things which God has done (cf. Lk 2:19, 51). The treasury of Mary's heart also contains the experiences of every family, which she cherishes. For this reason, she can help us understand the meaning of these experiences and to hear the message God wishes to communicate through the life of our families (AL 30).



REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. In the light of the Word of God, what do you discover about the family?
2. To what commitment does the journey of this first Chapter of the apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* lead you?

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