

Radical renewal or nothing new?

Pope Francis's post-synod teaching on marriage and family (*Amoris Laetitia*)

By Clare Watkins

"Has the Church's teaching changed with *Amoris Laetitia*? No." This was the clear statement made and elaborated on by the Bishop of Portsmouth, Philip Egan, in his pastoral letter following the promulgation of this important Apostolic Exhortation. For Bishop Philip Egan – as for, no doubt, many others – the sense of no changes being made to Church doctrine, law or practice is a cause for some relief, a basis for a confident assurance that the Faith is what it always has been. For others this sense that *Amoris Laetitia* changes nothing has been a source of disappointment and frustration: those whose hopes centred on somehow giving a more positive and inclusive place to the divorced and remarried, the co-habiting, those in same sex relationships and so forth, can be left with the question: "Was this all a fuss about nothing?"



One of the reasons these questions can be felt so especially keenly is down to the unprecedented sense of involvement that many have felt in the process. "On Love in the Family" or *Amoris Laetitia* (to use its Latin title) is the fruit of three years of debate, reflection and speculation, which has involved church leaders, laity, and wider society. Not only have there been two Synods, but also consultation with the wider Church, as some of the most sensitive, personal and, so, powerful aspects of the living of our Catholic faith have been reflected on. And, in a society such as ours, many want to see "the results": who has "won" in the sometimes controversial debates around the divorced and remarried, the co-habiting couples, the same sex couples and their places in the Church community? Thinking about, teaching about and theologising about these most fundamental aspects of our human life – relationship, sex, and marriage – is always fraught with difficulties.

Whilst the tone set by Pope Francis has been consistently open, mature and compassionate, all too often in our communities there has been real hurt and lack of sensitivity in how these matters have been addressed. So perhaps the first lesson to learn is that the reading of *Amoris Laetitia* must be carried out, to quote Cardinal Baldisseri, "with the logic of pastoral mercy" – where mercy is understood not as some paternalistic and superior removal of a just punishment, but rather as that form that God's love takes when confronted with our pervasive, and universal, human weakness and brokenness. The logic of the text is, fundamentally, one of love in the face of human struggles, one of grace that meets people in our mess and muddle.

Of course Bishop Egan, with whose words I began, is – in one sense – absolutely right: this is not a document that "changes Church teaching" – nor was it ever intended to be. However, what I want to suggest through this short presentation is that what *Amoris*

Laetitia does is actually rather more radical than that. For it returns us instead to the root (*radix*) of what it means to live as Christians in all the ordinariness of humanity – to live as the Body of Christ, which is a “family of families”, an embodiment of love in real, practical, flawed relationships.

It does this by speaking of the *realities* of marriage, family and relationship in a way which I think is shaped by three strong, fundamental themes: incarnation; discernment; and a culture of God’s merciful love. These are the tenses I wish to demonstrate in our time together, and to think about in terms of the real difference they might make to the life of the Church and the lives of the many people who currently feel at odds with that ecclesial living. However, before going into more detail here, an overview of the content of the Apostolic Exhortation will be helpful.

An overview of the document

It is very striking to see a kind of map of the territory through which the Exhortation leads its reader. The path taken does itself, I believe, tell us something about the way we are here being encouraged to think, speak and act in matters of faith, marriage, family and relationship. To begin with, we can note that the clear reaffirmation of Church teaching in these matters, as received from John Paul II, Paul VI and Pius XII, is to be found in the third chapter. What is significant, I think, for the way this is to be read, is the route that is taken to get to this point.

So, in chapter 1, Pope Francis sets the tone of his message by rooting it in Scripture. He does this not only by referring to “biblical teaching” on marriage and family, but, more predominantly, through a more narrative account of scripture accounts of human families – an account which not only celebrates human relationships and their reflection of God’s grace in Creation, but also recognises the scriptural testimony to family life as “a path of suffering and blood”. (19) * What we see here is that, right from the start, Pope Francis is concerned with the realities and complexities of his subject – realities and complexities that are properly a core part of God’s revelation of love in the scriptural narratives.

Right from the start our consideration of faith and family is to be undertaken as an attentiveness to “realities”, in the sure and scripturally-based knowledge that it is in these realities, even as they are subject to the Fall, that the story of God’s redeeming love is to be seen. As Pope Francis boldly asserted in his first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*: “Realities are more important than ideas!”

It is from this scriptural reflection that the text then moves to consider not, first of all, Church teaching, but rather the contemporary experiences of families in all their grounded, concrete complexity (Chapter 2). This rooting of theology in practices and lived experience is characteristic of the Latin American Liberation Theology which has been so much a part of Francis’s thought – and this is especially true of Argentinian Liberation Theology, with its emphasis on popular religious culture, the lives of the poor and ordinary Christians as an environment for seeing and understanding the work and love of God. So, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Holy Father speaks warmly of popular devotion. It is this same sense of the importance of “the fleshy”, the human being with a face and story all their own, that underpins the humility and love with which the ordinary, flawed experiences of marriage and family are spoken of in the second

* *This and other numbers in the text refer to paragraphs in Amoris Laetitia.*

chapter of *Amoris Laetitia*.

It is for this reason, too, that reflection on the concrete and material needs of marriages and families is also given significant space in this chapter. It is made clear that we cannot simply wax lyrical about the theological beauty of marriage and family without facing, as a priority, related issues of social justices: "dignified and affordable housing", access to affordable health care, just working conditions and hours. All these are seen as basic to our discussions of the family, as well as care for the particular stresses brought about by migration, disability and care for the elderly and inform. (44-48).

The questions of marriage and family are, first of all, questions of the just ordering of societies. These real and practical demands precede the work of speaking doctrinally, morally and theologically about these deeply human ways of life. So this is the path we take to revisiting first ecclesial teaching on marriage and family (chapter 3) and then the biblical and theological tradition around the living of loving relationships in chapter 4. Here again, the lens through which we are to read is clearly that of God's merciful and constant love.

In introducing chapter 3 as a summary of Church teaching on the family Pope Francis sets the scene, remembering how the Synod Fathers "began with the gaze of Jesus and they spoke of how he 'looked upon the women and men whom he met with love and tenderness, accompanying their steps in truth, patience and mercy as he proclaimed the demands of the Kingdom of God'". (60) Having made this summary in this key of compassion, the document comes to what, for many readers, is the heart of the whole text – Chapter 4's reflection on I Cor 13: 4-7.

Each phrase of these verses is reflected on at length, particularly relating it to the work and vocation of love with married and family life. These powerful and moving meditations remind us of something that is, perhaps, too easily forgotten: that it is "the official teaching of the Catholic Church" that marriage is about *love*! And this love is profoundly of the Gospel; it calls us into a daily practice of friendship, characterised by three simple human words – please, thank you and sorry (133ff); and it is celebrated in the pleasures and passion of sexual love as a created and graced good. (142)

Chapter 5 speaks of the welcoming of children as gifts into the marriage relationship, reaffirming church teaching on openness to life, before the path leads us to consideration of pastoral practices in chapters 6-8 – the questions which so many were (and are) painfully and immediately conceded with. Particularly notable here is the way in which Chapter 6 makes clear the limits of what can be done in this – or any – papal document. It recognizes the importance of context and particularities of cultures in relation to speaking to these human social realities of love, relationship and domestic living – again, in tune with Pope Francis's background in liberation theology in Argentina. It is this attentiveness to realities that means that the Exhortation cannot give a "pastoral plan" to all local churches for all circumstances.

Thus, all that it is proper for the Pope to do here, in reflecting with the Synod of bishops, is to offer some general reflections on "significant pastoral challenges." It is important to note here that of major concern among these pastoral challenges are questions of *formation* - formation of couples for marriage (a lifelong matter, not simply reducible to a marriage preparation course) *and* of seminarians and priests. In particular, what is signalled as crucial in all such formation is a practical realistic



approach, equipping people not simply with doctrines, but with skills, and inter-disciplinary understanding.

For example, speaking of seminary training the document argues that:

"Seminarians should receive a more extensive interdisciplinary, and not merely doctrinal, formation

in the areas of engagement and marriage....It is important for families to be part of the seminary process and priestly life, since they help to reaffirm these and to keep them well grounded in reality." (203)

It is, of course, in chapter 8 that so many of the difficult questions that were the focus of so much media and ordinary Catholic attention are treated. It is also here that we see some of the most characteristic and renewing features of this document – features which, I would argue, militate against any over-simple sense that “nothing has been changed” by *Amoris Laetitia*. Here, again, the key things to attend to are the ways in which the Pope exhorts us to attend to these challenges and difficulties – with love, and in a spirit of accompaniment. It is in this context that the much-reported “law of gradualness” is referred to (293ff), emphasising the ways in which we are all on journeys towards holiness, even whilst living broken and sinful lives. The key is to enable what is already good and of God to grow, rather than merely condemning what is not yet perfect. So: *"...the Church does not disregard the constructive elements in those situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching on marriage."* (292)

For it is precisely from these elements – of love, fidelity, friendship – upon which the Church has no monopoly, let us remember, that the couple and the family can grow God-ward. The Holy Father goes further, underlying the realities of God’s grace at work, even in what might appear to be (or actually be) situations flawed by sin. A number of quotes illustrate this powerfully:

"...there is a need "to avoid judgments which do not take into account the complexity of various situations" (296)

"The Church possesses a solid body of reflection concerning mitigating factors and situations. 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. More is involved here than mere ignorance of the rule." (301)

"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." (305)

What we have here, I believe, is at least the beginnings of a renewed understanding of the nature of “law” and “rule” in the living of holiness. This renewed understanding is not entirely new, as the frequent references to Thomas Aquinas in this section make clear; but in our own context of emerging from an over-rational modernity, it can call us back, and forwards, to a graced, compassionate and transformative engagement with the realities of our world, within which God is, surely, at work.

Incarnation and the sacramentality of even broken human living

It is at this point that I want to bring our overview of *Amoris Laetitia* to a close by suggesting consideration of three themes which can be seen as emerging from the text: incarnation; discernment; and a culture of God's merciful love.

Turning first to incarnation, it can be seen that this a text that is permeated by that sense of "realities" which was such a strong theme in the Holy Father's first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. There he boldly reflected on his conviction that "realities are more important than ideas". In *Amoris Laetitia* this is given a particular focus, as the realities of marriage and family relations shape the document's message. In all these places, and throughout the document, there persists a care for concrete realities, leading to a consistent call to the church to develop "a healthy dose of self-criticism", especially when tempted to "an excessive idealism." Such idealism can all too often put people off marriage and family, precisely because of its apparent failure to engage with the realities which people experience. (36)

There are a couple of problems with this emphasis on "realities". The first is that it can sound like we are assuming that the Christian traditions around marriage and family, and the truth they seek to express are, somehow, not quite "real" in the way actual experiences are. In fact, the realities of practice and experience, and the realities of true teaching and insight, are held together throughout the text, reflecting that authentic Catholic instinct for an incarnational, sacramental realism.

So, when it comes to improving preparation for marriage, or the training of clergy (chapter 6) we are presented with a vision of a thoroughly interdisciplinary approach to married and family life. Deepening of understanding in this area must always involve "a more extensive interdisciplinary, and not merely doctrinal, formation." (202) Guidelines for marriage preparation of couples are thoroughly practical, equipping them with skills of communication and reflection. These skills are not seen as distinct from doctrine and theology, but rather as an authentic and necessary means of embodying the Christian tradition in living, contextually appropriate ways.

A second problem for some, here, is that this deep sense of integrated faith and practice in marriage and family resists any very simple black and white responses. It is not clear "who wins". But for this document this is not a problem, but rather a graced and proper *complexity*, entirely in keeping with our Catholic faith. We believe in God who has spoken to us in human history, in the lives of ordinary men and women; we believe that God's fullest "Word" is, in fact, the life of a real person, lived in a particular time and place, with his own family – Jesus; and we believe in the lively presence of God's Spirit in all the muddles and joys and grieving of human lives. This is the proper complexity of graced reality, which is at the heart of *Amoris Laetitia*.

The call to discernment

With this complexity – that proper and lovely "muddle" especially familiar to those of us who are parents – comes a particular demand, addressed to all in the Church, which comprises my second theme: the call to *discernment*. This word is found thirty-two times in the Exhortation, the majority of these occasions being found in chapter 8 ☒ "Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness" – the chapter which speaks most clearly of "irregular", fractured or difficult situations in marriage and family.

“Discernment” is used here to describe that careful attentiveness to the particularities of people’s lives and relationships, in the light and love of the Holy Spirit, and with a learned care for the Christian tradition.

This call to discernment can be recognised as *the* most significant and transformative teaching of *Amoris Laetitia*. It is a call which doesn’t “change teaching/ doctrine”, but does transform the *ways* in which we teach and learn as a church together. And this, perhaps, changes everything. Discernment ensures a sensitivity to each particular set of situations for each couple, family, person, rejecting as “reductive” any approach which simply measures actions against a general rule: “that is not enough discern and ensure full fidelity to God in the concrete life of a human being.” (304)

It is Pope Francis’ commitment to concrete realities, God’s presence among them, and the subsequent call to discernment, that enables him to encourage us all to see “the constructive elements in those situations which do not yet or no longer respond” to Church teaching on marriage. (292) Even in “irregular”, broken situations the prayerful discerner of God’s Spirit will recognise love which “in some ways reflects God’s own love”. (294)

The renewal of Church culture

Such a fundamental call for renewal of Church culture in relation to the real situations of people’s domestic relationships brings challenges, of course. Discernment requires humility, attentiveness to traditions, experiences and context, and prayerful sensitivity to the Spirit; a discerning Church is one in which both laity and pastors seek to grow in spiritual maturity, together. More prosaically, the discerning Church is one in which we cannot simply and exclusively look to Rome for a single solution, an “easy recipe” which can then be applied to every particular situation. (§299)

Local Church communities will need to reflect together, in maturity and attentiveness, for the truly radical nature of this text to be received into the life of the Church. If we respond joyfully to Pope Francis vision and call in *Amoris Laetitia* I believe we will see something quite remarkable and lovely: the renewal of the whole Church through the loving contemplation of “domestic Church” in the ordinary, flawed living of love in our households.

This talk was given to the Hertfordshire Newman Circle in June, 2016. Dr Clare Watkins is a lecturer in Ministerial Theology at the University of Roehampton.

Advance Notice

London Newman Lecture 2017

Thursday, March 2nd

Frank Field MP

6.00 for 6.30 start at Loyola Hall,

Heythrop College, Kensington Square, London W8 5HN

Full details will be published in the January 2017 issue of *The Newman*

