

PRESENTATION OF THE APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION

AMORIS LAETITIA

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The “Synodal” Nature of the Document

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis has collected the fruits of a long ecclesial journey and has presented them authoritatively to the whole Catholic Church. During a period of two years, the Pope asked the Church, in all its manifestations, and taking a “synodal” approach, to devote full attention to the family. He began by asking his Cardinals, in the February 2014 Consistory, to undertake a consideration of the subject. This was followed by the two Synods in 2014 and 2015, and he himself led the way by devoting almost all his weekly audience talks in 2015 to the various aspects of family life. In addition, he introduced a new procedure into the preparations for Synods by having the Synod staff ask for, collect and evaluate detailed recommendations from dioceses around the world. I don’t believe that any other papal document has ever had the benefit of such extensive preparation and input.

In the Exhortation, the Pope emphasizes that this “synodal” methodology reflected in the document was *“impressive and illuminating,”* and he continues: *“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) I think it important in my presentation to discuss how this new process affected both the content and the methodology of the two Synods.

Immediately evident is the new relationship that must exist between the Church and today's families. The Church is called to feel their *"enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures."* (§126) Reading these words, it is impossible not to hear the echo of opening sentence of *Gaudium et Spes*, perhaps the best known of the documents of the Second Vatican Council: *"The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the [families] of this age, especially [hurting families] and those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts."* (cf. §1 of *Gaudium et Spes*) There is a common thread of "joy" (*gaudium* in Latin) that links *Amoris Laetitia* directly to the Council, from the announcement that the Council would take place (*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*) to *Gaudium et Spes* to the Pope's 2013 Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. It is the common thread of "that immense sympathy" that Blessed Paul VI spoke of when referring to the sensitivity that characterized the work of Vatican II.

Throughout the Document, Warmth and Closeness for Families

Every page of the document reflects great warmth and sympathy for families. For example, the Pope states clearly that *"in no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God's plan in all its grandeur."* (§307) The Church therefore cannot be hesitant as it proclaims that ideal, following the Lord's own strong preaching about the beauty and the seriousness of the marriage bond as a full actualization of the faith of the husband and wife. Marriage is indispensable in the life of the Church, and it is a precious resource for evangelizing all of life. Here we touch upon a dimension that is not simply a renewal of pastoral strategy, it is much more. We are talking about a new way of "being Church" in the world. This new way is reflected in both *Amoris Laetitia* and *Evangelii Gaudium*, which are interwoven and complement each other.

It is the greatness of the ideal of marriage that led the Pope to ask the Church to renew its commitment to accompanying families in the concrete realities of their lives. The Church is a mother and doesn't look at families from the outside like some kind of court clerk who tracks

changes and looks for faults to find. But neither is it blind, nor does it ever give up. *Amoris Laetitia* reveals clearly the ills that afflict families today; but, unlike prophets of doom or children of surrender, the Church knows that those ills are “not sicknesses unto death,” (Jn 11:4) as Jesus said of his friend Lazarus. The Church is a friend to families, and it is close to all of them on their path to the fullness of their commitment to Jesus.

The Exhortation, clearly reflecting Jesus’ passionate friendship with families, is a long meditation on all the aspects of family life, those that enrich it as well as those that are threatening. It is, however, a meditation that is part of a strategic vision. Its meditation on the family is not simply a meditation on individual stories of struggles and of love, important though they are. It is a meditation on the history of the world itself. The family is the mother of all relationships, and it appears as such in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis; the family and society are inseparable, so much so that if things aren’t going well in families, neither are they going well in all of society.

Toward a “Family” Church

Within his strategic vision, the Pope is asking for a change of pace and style that goes to the very shape of the Church. The Church cannot fulfill its family mission from the Lord without calling families themselves to share in that mission, and without acting as the Trinitarian Lord Himself acts, that is, in the communion of a family relationship. This basic ecclesiology of the family is the very air that the Exhortation breathes; it is the horizon toward which the Church wants to lead believers in this new era. If the transformation called for in the Exhortation is welcomed with faith, it is destined to renew decisively the way in which the community of believers perceives itself in this time of great change.

The key to this transformation is not found where some thought it to be, that is, in the dispute that marked the beginning of the recent synodal process, namely, the presumed conflict (or necessary choice) between doctrinal rigor and pastoral flexibility. Rather, urged on by the Pope’s teaching commitment, the Church is confirmed in its task of overcoming any artificial separation or opposition between truth and practice, between doctrine and pastoral care, in

order to rediscover the depth of moral responsibility involved in the way it interprets doctrine. There is a pastoral dimension to doctrine, but at the same time pastoral practice itself is doctrinal. The two must be lived out as a renewed perspective on the Church's very being. This responsibility, of which the Lord Himself gave us many clear examples during his earthly ministry, requires the Church (the Christian community) to discern rules in a way that takes into account the lives that the Church's members are living, so that no one ever loses sight of being loved by God.

The Gospel image that I would use to describe the "model of church" to be lived out today comes from the parable of the lost sheep (See Luke 15:4-7). But it is not just the shepherd who is to go out to find the lost sheep, all the ninety-nine are called to go out with that shepherd to find, accompany, discern with and integrate whoever needs help. Our lives must be a constant "heading out." The ninety-nine, if they are left alone, are excluded from the essential missionary dimension of the shepherd; and the sheepfold risks becoming no more than a self-referential bureaucracy. The Exhortation calls for a new "model of Church" that is fully missionary, always "heading out"—and producing results. That's why—in the context of family—it's not enough just to reorganize family pastoral activities. Much more is needed. All pastoral activity must have a family orientation, or, to put it more clearly, the whole Church must be a family.

The Pope knows that it is not easy to welcome and adopt the approach he calls for, but he doesn't want any misunderstanding. He knows that there are those, even among committed believers, who would like the Church to be a sort of courtroom of life and human history, to be a Church that accuses, a clerk who records transgressions and compliance without taking into account the painful circumstances of life or the difficult choices we have to make. That view is one-sided and it forgets that the Church has been commissioned by the Lord to be courageous and strong in its protection of the weak, in forgiving wrongs, in healing the wounds of fathers, mothers, children, brothers and sisters—starting with those who realize that they are prisoners of their own failings, and who are in despair for having ruined their lives. The Lord wants all to be accompanied as they work toward full integration into the Body of Christ, His Church.

There are at least two major signs of this change of direction:

(a) Clearly, Holy Matrimony is indissoluble, but the bond between the Church and its sons and daughters is even more so, because it is like the bond that Christ has established with the Church, which is full of sinners who were loved by God even while they were still sinners. They are never abandoned, not even when they sin again. As St. Paul says, this is a great mystery, and it goes beyond any romantic metaphor of a love that is based on an idyllic but unrealistic “blue heaven.”

(b) The second sign is that the Bishop has full authority and responsibility for maintaining and protecting the bond between the Church and its members, with the knowledge that the salvation of souls is what is most important (a solemn affirmation that is repeated at the end of the Code of Canon Law but that is often overlooked). The Bishop is a judge because he is also a shepherd, and a shepherd knows his sheep even (or especially) when they go astray. His most important task is always to lead them home, where he can care for them and heal them; and he cannot do that if he leaves them where they are, abandoning them to their fate because “they brought it on themselves.”

It is clear that a new ecclesial style is being called for, and this new style requires an understanding of the variety of situations that must be dealt with. The Pope is not calling for new abstract doctrine or new legal rules. In the Exhortation he recalls that while during the Synods there was a variety of contributions from the participants, that variety has produced a “many-faceted gem.” (§4) In this new perspective, theologians have an incentive to undertake a renewed consideration of the family, and individual dioceses are tasked with taking responsibility for finding answers to the countless challenges that families are called on to face in the societies of which they are part. The Pope writes that, “*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.’*” (§3) He notes as well that, “*...not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium.*” (§3)

The Family in the Word of God and in Contemporary Society, and its Vocation Today.

In the first three Chapters after the Introduction, the Exhortation examines the family from three points of view. The first presents the families whom we know from the Bible, and we learn of their stories, which are characterized by “love and crises.” (cf. §8)

The second describes the challenges that families today are called on to face: from migration to the ideological denial of differences between the sexes (“gender ideology”); from a culture of planned obsolescence to campaigns in favor of zero population growth and reproduction-related biotechnologies; from housing shortages and unemployment to pornography and abuse of minors; from care for persons with disabilities to respect for the elderly; from judicial deconstruction of the family to violence against women. The document, moreover, presents all-consuming individualism as a poison that destroys families at their roots and leads families to a paradoxical situation: *“The fear of loneliness and the desire for stability and fidelity exist side by side with a growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that could hamper the achievement of one’s personal goals.”* (§34) That is the paradox between the radical need for family that all experience and the growing fragility of family bonds that disappear, that break, that reconstitute themselves and multiply.

In the third Chapter, the Pope presents the vocation of the family as described by Jesus and embraced by the Church. He discusses the indissolubility of marriage and its sacramentality. He discusses its fruitfulness and the rearing of children. Among other things the Pope—in a conscious self-criticism—asks the Church whether at times we have made the mistake of presenting “a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families.” (§36) He reveals all his doubts about the effectiveness of a pastoral approach that insists on *“doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace.”* (§37) Clearly—but this is a personal thought of mine—a crucial question remains unanswered: Why do young people today prefer just “living together” to marriage? Faced with this situation, shouldn’t we ask ourselves whether the way we present the “Gospel of the Family” is just not attractive? Shouldn’t we reexamine what we are saying and the way we are saying it?

Fruitful Love and the Generations in Holy Matrimony and the Family

Chapters Four and Five are the heart of the Exhortation. They examine the substance of Holy Matrimony and the family, namely, the bond of love between a man and a woman and the generative fruitfulness that follows from it. Here the document presents a unique new approach. The Pope does not (as is commonly done in marriage catechesis) limit himself to commenting only on The Song of Songs and its fundamental lesson—which of course is a jewel of Bible revelation about the love between man and woman. He goes further. In Chapter Four, he comments in a completely original way, and word by word, on the subtle phenomenology of God-inspired love in the beautiful Pauline hymn in First Corinthians, Chapter 13. The Pope speaks of love in terms that are in no way simply mystical and romantic. It is noteworthy that the word that appears most frequently in the Exhortation is “love,” followed by “family,” “marriage,” and “Church,”—a series that is not just accidental. It is evident that the love of which the text speaks is marked by concreteness, by interaction, by beauty, by sacrifice, by vulnerability and by tenacity (“*love bears all, hopes all, believes all, forgives all, endures to the last*”). And God’s own love is like that!

We are far from that individualism that shuts love up in an obsessive “just us” situation that endangers the “joy” of the marital and family bond. The Pope’s lexicon of family love is not lacking in passion, it is rich in fruitfulness. For that reason, he is comfortable in considering and appreciating that sexual intimacy between spouses is a great gift from God for men and women. We can say that here too the papal document brings to fullness the suggestions contained in *Gaudium et Spes*, which he cites: “*Marriage is firstly an ‘intimate partnership of life and love’ which is a good for the spouses themselves,*” while sexuality is “*ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman.*” (§80 of *Gaudium et Spes*). The lexicon of family love, as presented by the Pope is indeed rich in passion and strong in fruitfulness.

In Chapter Five, after speaking of love in the preceding Chapter, the Pope turns his attention to the second dimension of the marital relationship—fruitfulness. He speaks with spiritual and psychological depth about welcoming new life, about the time of waiting for a new baby to arrive, about the love of a mother and father, about the presence of grandparents. He

speaks as well of fruitfulness in a larger sense—adoption, grandparents, extended family—all these promote a “culture of encounter” in families with the presence of uncles and aunts, cousins, in-laws, friends. The Pope emphasizes the necessarily social dimension of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony (§186). In a family, the relationship between young and old has a special role, as does the relationship between brothers and sisters, which is a kind of training ground for the broader world of adult relationships. In this way, *Amoris Laetitia* sheds a new light on the relationship between love and the generation of new life, one that goes beyond any separation or opposition between these two fundamental and constituent meaningful reasons for marriage: the relationship between husband and wife is intrinsically generative and fruitful, and the generation of another person, the child, is the transcendent fruit of the love between mother and father.

In this context, I would like to emphasize two points. First of all, children. The document states clearly that a child is not simply the result of desire. The child is a participant in God’s plan for passing on life. From this realization comes the question of the relationship between generations, which family fragmentation and the passing nature of sexual love put at risk. The relationship between generations is where heredity must become fruitful. This is the great task entrusted to the family. It must treasure life’s traditions without imprisoning them, and it must give added value to the future without rendering it lifeless. This dynamism is not possible if the family loses its societal role of stability and vigorous affectivity. Put briefly, we don’t get married just for ourselves. Holy Matrimony is richer if a couple doesn’t close itself within itself. Doing that would not increase joy, it only brings sorrow. The family is the engine of history. It is the love that is the source of life. It is by no means a refuge for those who want to escape the challenges of life and history. The entire wealth of peoples—knowledge, culture, traditions, gift and reciprocity—is built into the relationship and alliance between the generations. The passion for passing on wisdom that is the hallmark of intergenerational solidarity, and the alliance between generations, are an accurate thermometer of social progress.

Chapter Seven deals with education, and I talk about it at this point to tie it together with the passing on of life that I have just discussed. With respect to children, the Pope notes that “If

parents are obsessed with always knowing where their children are and controlling all their movements, they will seek only to dominate space. But this is no way to educate, strengthen and prepare their children to face challenges. What is most important is the ability lovingly to help them grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy.” (§261)

The attention that the document gives to sexual education is also significant. It is something relatively new in the Church’s pastoral activity. The Exhortation says that it is particularly necessary today, *“in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialized and impoverished.”* (§280)

Pastoral Aspects

In Chapter Six, the Exhortation stresses that families are evangelizers themselves, not simply recipients of evangelization. It is they above all who are called to communicate to the world the “Gospel of the Family” as an answer to the deep need for family that is written in the heart of the human person and in society itself. Clearly, families have a great need for help in this mission, and in this context the Pope speaks about the responsibility of ordained ministers. He freely admits that they often *“lack the training needed to deal with the complex problems currently facing families.”* (§202) He also asks for renewed attention to the formation of seminarians. If on the one hand we must improve their psycho-affective formation and involve families more in their formation for ministry, (cf. §203) on the other he maintains that *“The experience of the broad oriental tradition of a married clergy could also be drawn upon.”* (§202)

Next, he begins a reflection on the threefold relationship among families, the Church as mother in community, and the spiritual fatherhood of the ordained ministry. Today, it is clear that there is a wall separating families from the Christian community. We can say that families are more or less unchurched because they are often closed in on themselves and that the Christian communities are not very family-oriented because they are often exasperatingly bureaucratic.

He then raises another point worthy of attention: the duty of staying close to engaged couples as they prepare for marriage. The text speaks of the importance of helping couples

rediscover parish life because it is increasingly clear that the faith is to be lived as part of the life of the community. As Pope Benedict XVI taught in the Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, all “religious individualism” is to be avoided, and from this principle follows the necessity of accompanying newlyweds along their first steps as a family (including responsible parenthood). Here we are entering on a vast area that is almost completely unknown in day-to-day parish life. On the other hand, the experience that independent family organizations have in developing effective accompaniment programs is very useful. Likewise, support for family associations is important for the development of the spiritual life of families and for a more effective Church presence in social, and even political, life.

The Pope also calls for accompaniment of persons who are abandoned, separated or divorced. Among other things, he emphasizes the importance of the recent reform of the procedures for handling marriage cases and the importance of the new responsibilities entrusted to Bishops. The document speaks too of how much children suffer in situations of marital conflict and he says clearly, *“Divorce is an evil and the increasing number of divorces is very troubling. Hence, our most important pastoral task with regard to families is to strengthen their love, helping to heal wounds and working to prevent the spread of this drama of our times.”* (§246) He mentions marriages with non-Catholic Christians and with non-Christians, and he speaks of families where there are persons with same-sex tendencies, emphasizing that respect is due them as persons, and that every unjust discrimination in their regard and every form of aggression or violence is wrong.

The final part of the Chapter *“When death makes us feel its sting”* has great pastoral value. This aspect of life needs new pastoral attention: every family, without exception, mourns and needs to be accompanied as it does so. This need is even more pressing today, given society’s decreased appreciation of mortality and the disappearance from society of words and actions that honor the dead and comfort those who are left behind.

Care for Wounded Families—Accompany, Discern, Integrate Weakness

Chapter Eight—one of the most highly anticipated—is an invitation to mercy and to pastoral discernment in the face of situations that are not fully in conformity with what the Lord preaches. Just as he did at the beginning of the document, the Pope repeats that the Church must in no way cease to illuminate the truth of the faith, and the heavy demands that discipleship makes of believers. On the other hand, the Pope asks us to look on others as Jesus does and to be aware of how God has clearly spoken, and acted, and encountered humanity. The Pope recognizes that: *“Some forms of union radically contradict [the ideal of marriage], while others realize the ideal in at least a partial and analogous way.”* (§292) In this group he includes believers who are “living together” or who are only civilly married. Still, 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) We see here the Gospel’s concern not to “quench the smoking flax.” (Mt. 12:20) Every “seed of a family” wherever it is found, is to be accompanied and encouraged to grow.

The Pope is describing a new path for the pastoral life of the Church, a path of mercy. Allow me here to point out an interesting development in terminology: in *Amoris Laetitia* the word “mercy” appears more than three times as often as it does in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, a document that is some four times longer than *Amoris Laetitia*.

We need a Church dedicated to accompanying and integrating everyone. No one is to be left out. What is asked for is compassion, not condemnation. This is the meaning of discernment that tries to find in diverse situations those *“signs of love that in some way reflect God’s own love.”* (§294) For this reason we are to avoid *“judgements that do not take into account the complexity of various situations”* and we are called on *“to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition.”* (§296) Every person must find a place in the Church and *“No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel!”* (§297) The Pope notes that there can be many different situations and they *“should not be pigeonholed or fit into overly rigid classifications leaving no room for a suitable personal and pastoral discernment.”* (§298) For this reason, the Pope continues, *“...it is understandable*

that 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.” (§300) He continues by affirming that “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.” (§300)

The message that the document gives to Bishops is simple and direct. Three words that taken together make up one mission: accompany, discern, integrate into the Christian community. It is clear that such a mission is possible on only one condition, namely that the Christian community clearly share in it. It can be said that it is the community with its pastor that is called to accompany, discern with and integrate the person who is setting out on a path to growth in love for Christ. We know well that God does not save us one by one but rather by gathering us into a people. The Second Vatican Council gave clear emphasis to this point, and we know that our shared faith and love for our brothers and sisters can work miracles, even in the most difficult circumstances.

Access to God’s grace which leads to the conversion of sinners, is a serious matter. The Catholic doctrine of moral judgment, somewhat neglected perhaps, is restored to a place of honor by the Exhortation: the moral quality of a process of conversion does not necessarily coincide with the legal definition of the state of life of the sinner. That is why the text says that, *“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.” (§301)*

The special, but not the only, role of the parish priest or chaplain in this new approach is to accompany persons along this ecclesial path of conversion, for which the Bishop has the first responsibility; but discernment and integration is not a do-it-yourself job, not for the clergy, nor for the faithful. There is no legal formula that gets applied automatically, but neither is discernment an unprincipled individual choice, nor is it a question of exceptions to be made or privileges to be granted. It is a process traced out on a pathway of conscience tied to the “internal forum” (spiritual direction and the Sacrament of Reconciliation). The solution that is

called for is a tight weave of Church doctrine, examination of consciences, respect for moral principle and the protection of communion among believers.

Along these lines, and welcoming what the Synod Fathers asked for, the Pope calls for *“discernment of the ways by which the various forms of exclusion currently practiced in the liturgical, pastoral, educational and institutional framework of the Church can be surmounted.”* (§299) There are seven areas from which divorced and remarried Catholics are excluded at present: being a godparent, a lector, an extraordinary minister of the Eucharist, a religion teacher, a catechist for First Communion or Confirmation; a member of the diocesan or parish pastoral council, and a best man or maid/matron of honor at a wedding (this last is discouraged but not forbidden). The Pope’s commitment to change in this area is explicit: Divorced and civilly remarried *“persons need to feel not as excommunicated members of the Church, but instead as living members, able to live and grow in the Church and experience her as a mother who welcomes them always, who takes care of them with affection and encourages them along the path of life and the Gospel. This integration is also needed in the care and Christian upbringing of their children, who ought to be considered most important.”* (§299) Individual dioceses are called on to reflect upon and decide about this question.

In addition, the Pope puts forward six criteria for the discernment that the Synod recommended: *“Useful in this process is (1) an examination of conscience through moments of reflection and repentance. The divorced and remarried should ask themselves: (2) how did they act towards their children when the conjugal union entered into crisis; (3) whether or not they made attempts at reconciliation; (4) what has become of the abandoned party; (5) what consequences the new relationship has on the rest of the family and the community of the faithful; and (6) what example is being set for young people who are preparing for marriage.”* (§299)

The Pope continues: *“What we are speaking of is a process of accompaniment and discernment which guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God. Conversation with the priest, in the internal forum, contributes to the formation of a correct judgment on what hinders the possibility of a fuller participation in the life of the Church and on*

what steps can foster it and make it grow. Given that gradualness is not in the law itself (cf. Familiaris Consortio, 34), this discernment can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity, as proposed by the Church.” (§300) Therefore, “When a responsible and tactful person, who does not presume to put his or her own desires ahead of the common good of the Church, meets with a pastor capable of acknowledging the seriousness of the matter before him, there can be no risk that a specific discernment may lead people to think that the Church maintains a double standard.” (§300)

The Pope asks for a reflection on “mitigating factors and situations” (§301) with respect to imputability and responsibility for actions; and, relying on St. Thomas Aquinas, he considers the relationship among the “norms of discernment”: “It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations. At the same time, it must be said that, precisely for that reason, what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule.” (§304) Seen in the normative light of moral theology, this eighth Chapter is doubtless the most demanding. The Pope, relying on traditional moral doctrine, connects with the classic theme of mitigating circumstances (§§300-303, 308) and proposes a serious reflection on the relation between norms and judgments in particular situations (discernment), without avoiding or diminishing norms, nor falling into a reductionist interpretation of moral conscience that would consider conscience a simple deductive “application” of a bloodless set of rules.

From what has been said about the possible integration of divorced and civilly remarried Catholics into the life of the Church community, three definitive conclusions can be drawn. If on the one hand it is true that confusion and scandal among the “normal” faithful is to be avoided, on the other hand confusion and alienation among the divorced and civilly remarried faithful is to be avoided as well. Clearly they are not excommunicated, but at the same time they are as a matter of fact reduced to being spectators in the life of the Church, rather than as persons eligible for the different ministries that are the responsibility that every baptized person has in the building up of the Church. Another point to be considered is the possible lack of Christian witness that children born of a second union have the right to receive from their parents.

Without that witness, they run the risk of a marginalization of which they are the victims, and not the guilty parties. From these considerations comes the path of discernment, the *via discretionis*, that allows pastors to evaluate each case on its own merits, particularly with regard to the gradual inclusion of persons who, finding themselves in an irreversible situation, are in particular need of welcome, accompaniment and mercy.

“The Logic of Pastoral Mercy,”

In the last section of Chapter Eight, Pope Francis, emphasizes that: *“To show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being. Today, more important than the pastoral care of failures is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus to prevent their breakdown.”* (§307) But the overall sense of the Chapter and of the spirit that the Pope intends to impress on the Church’s pastoral activity is summarized effectively in the final words of the Chapter: *“I encourage the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors or with other lay people whose lives are committed to the Lord. They may not always encounter in them a confirmation of their own ideas or desires, but they will surely receive some light to help them better understand their situation and discover a path to personal growth. I also encourage the Church’s pastors to listen to them with sensitivity and serenity, with a sincere desire to understand their plight and their point of view, in order to help them live better lives and to recognize their proper place in the Church.”* (§312) The elements on which discernment is build are trust on the part of the faithful who are living in complex situations and committed listening on the part of pastors. Speaking of the *“logic of pastoral mercy,”* the Pope states firmly: *“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.”* (n.311)

Marital and Family Spirituality

Chapter Nine is given over to marital and familial spirituality that is, *“made up of thousands of small but real gestures.”* (§311) He states clearly that: *“those who have deep spiritual aspirations should not feel that the family detracts from their growth in the life of the Spirit, but rather see it as a path which the Lord is using to lead them to the heights of mystical union.”* (§316) Everything, *“moments of joy, relaxation, celebration, and even sexuality can be experienced as a sharing in the full life of the resurrection.”* (§317) He speaks of prayer as a reflection of Easter joy, and of the spirituality of free and exclusive love where *“spouses accept the challenge and aspiration of supporting one another, growing old together, and in this way reflecting God’s own faithfulness;”* (cf. §319) and finally of marital and family spirituality as a spirituality of *“care, consolation and encouragement.”* (cf. §321) In the closing paragraph of the Exhortation, the Holy Father states: *“no family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love....All of us are called to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families, and every family must feel this constant impulse. Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together. What we have been promised is greater than we can imagine. 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.”* (§325).

Vatican City, May 3rd 2016